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By OLL COOMES

"I'M THE ORIGINAL, GINUWINE KA RISTOPHER KO-LUMBUS BANDY, AND YO'URE MY GAME, MISTER BLACK VULCAN!"

Kit Bandy's Brigade in Arizona;

OR,

Black Vulcan's Redwood Terrors.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "WHIP-KING JOE," "MINKSKIN MIKE," "OLD KIT BANDY'S DELIVERANCE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MOSES, THE HERMIT.

ON an eminence in the Black Mountains of Arizona, one Sunday morning in September, an old man stood leaning upon his staff and gazing, in thoughtful mood, upon the little mining-camp of Redwood that lay away down in the basin-like valley before him.

He had once been a tall man, but his form was bowed, apparently, with the weight of three-score-and-ten years. His long hair and beard were snow-white. He was clad in a blanket coat and breeches of buckskin, and, altogether, presented an uncouth and picturesque appearance. In fact, but for his venerable beard and the mild, subdued expression of his eyes, he might have been taken for a wild man or savage.

In the camp below he was known as Old Moses, the Hermit. His home was in a cavern back a mile or two from camp, and some facetious miner, with more knowledge than reverence of Holy Writ, had dubbed the old man Moses, the Lawgiver, and the hill, in which his cavern abode was situated, Mount Horeb.

Redwood lay entirely revealed to the old man's gaze. There were not over twenty buildings, all told, in the place, and every one of these had been erected there within a year.

All was apparently quiet in camp on this Sunday morning, although many miners could be seen going in and out of one of the more pretentious buildings.

As he continued to gaze upon the little settlement, Moses was suddenly aroused from his meditations by the sound of a footstep, and a voice saying:

"A penny for your thoughts, uncle!"

The old hermit turned, to face a man in every respect imaginable his very opposite. To the hermit he was a stranger. He was a young person of perhaps seven-and-twenty years, above the medium in height, and with a form of perfect physical development. A noble head sat upon a muscular neck, and a cast of strong and manly features reflected intelligence, good nature, indomitable courage, and a free, dashing spirit. He was dressed in an elegant suit after the style of the Mexican ranchero, with high-topped boots and sombrero of white. On his shoulder he carried a rifle.

"Ah! good-morning to you, my son!" the hermit exclaimed. "You took me by surprise."

"Beg pardon for my intrusion, uncle," the young man said in apology; "I ran onto you before I knew it. I mistrust you are Moses, the Hermit. I am Ralph King."

"Ah!" exclaimed the hermit, his eyes brightening a little "you're sometimes called the Nabob?"

"Yes, and sometimes the Vagabond," added King, with a laugh.

"You're the nephew of Judge Prosper Hurry, then? I've heard o' you down in camp. But you don't look like a vagabond a bit, my son."

"People will talk, uncle," replied Ralph, leaning upon his rifle, "and I just let them do it."

"But some has hinted that you war an outlaw—Black Vulcan hisself."

"Yes, some have declared I was Black Vulcan, but just let them prove it, uncle. I'm a free-born American, and don't propose to deny anything said about me until I have to."

"And they say you're a slick gambler," Moses added.

"Oh, yes! I do accommodate a fellow to a game once in awhile," frankly answered King.

"And they also say you're a fighter."

"I know how to defend myself, Moses, I'll confess, and whenever a yahoo steps on my toes I'm ready for him. But, I'm going to settle down now, pretty soon, uncle, and go into business. Uncle Prosper has offered me a half-interest in all his many ranches, and in the Redwood mines, if I'd quit roving around and look after the business. I'm his only relative on earth, and as he's getting old and infirm, I have accepted his proposition, and will, in a week or

two, become a citizen of Redwood, or rather make Redwood my headquarters until uncle's health will admit of his removal to some civilized place. I owe Uncle Prosper a debt of gratitude. He spent lots of money to educate me for a civil engineer, and after I'd graduated he got me a good position as assistant Government surveyor. But a year's surveying satisfied me, and I went to—to—well, I went to vagabonding. Captain Ruben Darrow, uncle's present pardner in the Sand Creek Ranch, and superintendent of his other ranches, kicks, I understand, on uncle taking me in—thinks I'll wreck the whole concern, but Captain Rube will have to kick. I know he don't like me, and I confess there's no love lost. It's a stand-off between us."

"That's right, my son," Moses rejoined; "take care of your old relative. He's a grand ole man. I have received kind treatment from him, and that's what I can't claim of the rest o' that camp, unless it be o' the little miner called 'Mother Ike.' Murder will out, they say, and if you've been a bad boy, you'll not escape punishment."

"You're a philosophical old fellow, after all, uncle," Ralph responded, with a smile; "but, say, are you on your way to camp?"

"For tobacco—yes."

"Then come along with me."

Ralph took the old man by the arm, and the two started down the long, steep hill.

Lightly, however, the aged Moses leant upon his new-found friend; in fact, Ralph King was a little surprised to see how sprightly was the old man's step, and how strong he appeared to be.

They were nearly an hour in reaching the camp. They landed in the valley near "Mother Ike's" cabin.

"I'll stop there a minute," decided Moses, somewhat out of breath, "and rest. I thank you, my son, for your kindness."

Ralph King went on toward his uncle's cabin, and Old Moses approached "Mother Ike's" door.

A little smooth-faced man of sixty years, this "Mother Ike." He came out the cabin and gave his caller a warm greeting. Together they entered the hut.

"Well, Moses, how's times over on Horeb?" asked the little man, as the hermit seated himself on a stool.

"Dull's a meat-ax, Isaac, and out o' smokin'-tobakker."

"You're in bad company, this mornin', ar'n't you?" Ike questioned.

"Why so? What do you mean?"

"I jist come over from 'The Combine,' and all the talk there's 'bout the Nabob Vagabond, and Desert Pirates, and Black Vulcan," answered Ike. "Some o' the boys feel sure King is that outlaw leader, and talk 'bout lynchin' and so on."

"Well, the boy may be a bad one—I don't know," Moses admitted, "but he's a superb feller for all that. I kind o' like him."

Moses remained an hour or two at Ike's, and then went over to the "store" to procure his tobacco. That building was situated about thirty rods across the valley from Ike's cabin. Over the door were the words, "The Combine." It was not only a supply-store, but a hotel, post-office, saloon and gambling-house—a combination superintended by one Con O'Begorra.

When Moses entered there were some twenty men in the house in all stages of intoxication. Most of them were Americans, with a few Mexicans and one or two half-breed Indians.

At a table over in one corner sat three men, who seemed to be keeping aloof from the general mob around the bar, although they were drinking freely.

One of these three was Captain Ruben Darrow, the man who, for some years, had superintended Judge Hurry's ranch interest, and, in fact, was the owner of a small interest in the Sand Creek Ranch. He was a person of some thirty years, tall and well-built, with a keen gray eye and the air of a shrewd, business individual.

One of his companions was known as Mohave Jim. He was a miner and friend of Darrow's, was older than the captain, and was a shrewd, sharp fellow, who was the acknowledged leader, so far as brains were concerned, in Redwood Camp.

The third man at the table was also a miner, known as Gila Bill. He was bushy-bearded, forty, and a bunk mate of Mohave Jim. Of great physical powers, he prided himself on having knocked out every miner in Redwood at the first round.

No sooner had Moses stepped inside "The

Combine," than a miner rushed up to him with a glass of liquor, saying, in a half-drunken tone: "Here's Ole Moses from Horeb, by thunder! He's come over to Sunday with us. Here, Moses, let's have communion service. Take this wine and drink to Redwood and the wealth that lays in her mines!"

"No! no!" demurred Moses, waving him back with trembling hands, "I've told you I do not drink liquor."

"Oh, but you must!" exclaimed half a dozen voices, and as many miners with slopping glasses crowded toward him. The old hermit backed away from them. They followed up. He backed out into the Plaza in front of The Combine. Still the drunken mob followed and crowded around him.

At this juncture a man on horseback rode up, unobserved by the rabble, and seeing what the excitement meant, exclaimed:

"Miners of Redwood, shame on you! Let that old man alone, or, by the gods, I'll thrash every one of you!"

The miners looked around and saw, seated upon a handsomely-caparisoned horse, a young man whose dark-blue eyes flashed upon them a look of withering scorn and anger that for a moment startled them.

The man was Ralph King, the Nabob Vagabond!

CHAPTER II.

THE NABOB "ON HIS MUSCLE."

THE moment the miners recognized the horseman who had addressed them in such an imperative and threatening tone as Ralph King, they expressed their indignation by hurling anathemas and glasses at him in a spirited manner.

His order and threat made them more determined that Moses should drink, and they pressed closer upon the old man.

Gila Bill, who had overheard the speech of the young Nabob, sprung to his feet and rushed outside, and when he saw Ralph leap from his saddle and make toward the miners, the bully sprung forward, and, striking an attitude of defense before King, exclaimed:

"Young Vagabond, stand back, or you'll git your fine clothes soiled and yer face spoilt!"

He had scarcely spoken, however, before he went down under a master stroke from the fist of the Nabob.

Nor did he come to the scratch on time again, but rose to his hands and knees, too "groggy" to regain his feet.

Without giving the bully a second glance, Ralph sailed into Old Moses's tormentors, striking right and left, and very quickly six or eight bloody-nosed miners were rolling and writhing upon the Plaza. The young Vagabond seemed to be a perfect Hercules in strength and a panther in agility—a trained athlete in skill and dexterity.

Moses looked on with eyes beaming with admiration, and as he did so his bent form became erect and his breast heaved as though the sight of the conflict was reviving the spirit of youth within him.

With a prejudice against Ralph King, previously engendered, and this prejudice now inflamed by liquor, the miners, urged on by Mohave Jim, seemed determined to annihilate the young Nabob. But the latter, keeping out of their grasp, punished every man most severely who came within reach of his terrible fists, and so long as the attack was maintained in that manner he apparently was abundantly able to hold his ground.

But, even with the great odds against the young Nabob, it seemed that treachery must be resorted to to defeat him, and a little weazen-faced Mexican Greaser came gliding from behind The Combine, knife in hand, and endeavored to slip up behind the young athlete.

But one eye observed this little assassin's movements, and Old Moses, with the quickness of youth almost, stepped forward and landed a blow on the Greaser's long neck that stretched him on the ground at the heels of the Nabob's horse, where the villain received another blow from the animal's hoof that laid him out completely senseless.

At this moment Marshal Ben Hall appeared on the scene, and the attack on Ralph King was stopped, though a bloodier outfit of miners had never been seen in Redwood than those fellows who had run against the Nabob's fists.

No arrests were made, although Mohave Jim was very urgent that King should be taken in custody; but, when Ben Hall asserted his dignity, and informed the crowd that if he arrested

one he would arrest all, Mohave slunk away, saying in an undertone to Captain Darrow:

"He's in sympathy with the Nabob. Ben Hall will bear watchin'."

The battered and bleeding miners dispersed to their cabins for repairs. "Centipede," the Mexican Greaser that King's horse had kicked, was carried into "The Combine" for treatment.

Old Moses stepped up to Ralph and thanked him kindly for his timely aid, then bade him good-by and started across the street to the cabin of Mother Ike.

Ralph King adjusted his collar, put on his gloves, mounted his horse, and, with a wave of his hand to Ben Hall, rode away down the street and disappeared in the canyon leading from the valley.

Captain Darrow now proceeded to the residence of Judge Hurry, to see how the old man would receive the news of his Nabob nephew's pugilistic performances.

Judge Prosper Hurry's cabin stood at the upper extremity of the basin-like valley. It was a big double log structure, with a porch in front, and furnished with many of the comforts of a pleasant home.

The judge was a man of sixty-eight. He had never been married. He had lived for forty years in the mountains and on the plains, and thus had become almost completely alienated from society. He was very wealthy, his riches being in cattle and horses in New Mexico, Texas and Arizona. He had lived for years in New Mexico, and while there had been elected alcalde, and, although he never served, the title of "Judge" thenceforth remained with him. A year previous to the opening of our story his health began to fail, at which his physician advised him to give up work and go up into the mountains, where the air was more salubrious, and remain in quiet at least a year.

Heeding this advice, he located in Redwood Basin and erected a commodious house. He brought with him two servants, Old Jasper and his wife, both colored. But the old man was soon destined to have company. The presence of gold was discovered in the surrounding bluffs and, in a few short weeks, Redwood Basin contained quite a little mining population.

The judge, an old miner himself, took a large interest in the mine by request of the others. He agreed to bring on a stamp-mill for the reduction of the ore, and at the time of which we write, the machinery was on its way to the Basin.

In various ways the judge aided the camp, out of his abundant means and good counsel, and was therefore held in high esteem by the miners. It was this regard for the chief citizen that had saved Ralph King from mob law.

Captain Darrow found the old man in a rage when he reached "The Retreat," as Hurry called his home. He had already heard of the street fight, but, contrary to Darrow's expectations, he soundly berated the miners for their abuse of Moses, and approved the action of his nephew, Ralph King, in defending the hermit from the mob.

When Darrow passed from The Retreat his face wore a look of disappointment. That afternoon he left Redwood for Sand Creek Ranch.

Before leaving camp Moses went up to The Retreat to pay his respects to the judge. The latter received him kindly. There was between these two old and eccentric men a bond of mutual respect and confidence, although one was a prince and the other a beggar, as it were, as far as worldly goods were concerned.

"You must stay all night with me, Moses," the judge declared, "and come and stay with me every night until Ralph returns. He's gone on a visit to Bob Bayard's, over in the mountains somewheres. Bob was an old friend of his, and he's long promised to visit him. Bob's a hunter and a noble big fellow."

So Moses staid there that night, and the two old fellows talked over the past until late in the night.

Tuesday evening Captain Darrow came up from the ranch, twenty miles away, and reported to the judge that the Desert Pirates had raided one of his—the judge's—southern horse-ranches, and had escaped into Mexico with at least fifty head of horses.

Naturally enough this threw Hurry into a passion, and he poured out the vials of his wrath on the military and police power of the Territory for their stupidity in permitting Black Vulcan and his gang to rob people with impunity, forso long a time.

Darrow staid over night in camp and until Wednesday noon. Before his departure, however, his usual liberality had been indulged in

at The Combine to such an extent that when he rode away two-thirds of Redwood was drunk, at his expense.

As usual, Moses appeared at The Retreat that evening to spend the night with the judge. Over their pipes they talked the hours away. Old Jasper and his wife had retired, and the lights in camp were all out.

It must have been near midnight when the door of the room in which the two old friends were seated was suddenly thrown open and a tall man, with a long black beard, and wearing a slouched hat and long gray coat, entered the room, a revolver in each hand, and, covering the judge and the hermit, said, in a deeply-muffled voice:

"Old folks, not one chirp or you're dead men! Judge Hurry, I'll trouble you for the two thousand cash I know you have in your house! Quick about it, too, and quiet! I'm here for money or blood!"

CHAPTER III.

TWO "ONLY AND ORIGINALS."

JUDGE HURRY was not a coward by any means. Nor was it the first time in his forty years of life in the wild West that he had confronted danger; but, old and infirm as he now was, without a weapon of any kind within reach, he readily perceived that he was wholly at the ruffian's mercy.

As for the hermit, he evinced no more surprise or fear than if the robber had been a friendly caller, but quietly leaned back in his chair and puffed away at his pipe in silence.

The robber waited a moment for the judge to recover from his surprise, and then repeated:

"Hurry up, judge, and fork over, if you'd live just one blessed minute longer!"

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed the old ranchman, his voice somewhat tremulous with rage; "would you rob me—"

"Rob a cattle-king?" interrupted the villain, with a low laugh. "Oh, don't talk of robbing a man so rich as you, judge, but shell out! You're worth thousands upon thousands, and just now happen to have a couple of those thousands in your house. I know this—no difference how I know it—and must make it a forced loan. Now, don't attempt to call help, or you'll rue it. We three can do the business. I know what I'm about. Redwood Camp is sleeping off a big drunk, and I don't want it disturbed. Now, judge, don't deny having money, but git it, and git it p. d. q.!"

"It's in yonder trunk," said Hurry, seeing there was nothing to be gained in delay, and no hope in resistance while the outlaw stood with the muzzle of his revolver within a foot of his face; "get it, and may it be your passport to the devil!"

"Trunk locked, judge?" the villain asked, with provoking coolness.

"Yes; and there's the key."

And the judge threw it on the floor at the robber's feet.

"Moses, take up that key!" commanded the outlaw; "unlock the chest and hand out the lucre. The judge is old, but he might try to spring a job on me for a' that, and I'm too cautious to be caught napping."

Moses quietly arose, shuffled across the floor, picked up the key and opened the trunk.

"It's in a canvas bag, Moses, under some clothes—it's all in gold," explained the judge, eager to have the matter over with.

Moses found the bag, and, lifting it from its resting-place, advanced with it toward the outlaw. In order to receive it the robber was compelled to drop one of his revolvers in his coat-pocket.

With the bag of coin in his left hand Moses handed it to the ruffian, who, receiving it, expressed satisfaction with the weight, shook it to see if it had the right jingle, and, to make assurance doubly sure, placed his other revolver under his arm and felt of the coins through the bag.

"It has the heft, the jingle and the feel," the villain confessed, with apparent satisfaction; "and now, judge, I must depart. Of course, the camp'll be in an uproar soon after I'm gone, and many and many'll be the conjectures as to who the 'tariff-collector' was; but you can say to them that it was the only and original—the genuine Black Vulcan himself that honored you with a call. So good-night, and sweet dreams to you."

And he started for the door.

"Stop!"

It was a firm, sharp voice, that made the outlaw start as violently as though a pistol had cracked near his ear, and when the astonished villain turned to find himself looking into the

muzzle of a derringer in the hand of Moses, he discovered that the hermit had him covered.

"Move a muscle and you're a dead man! I'm the only and original ginuwine Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy, Mountain Detective, and, by the horn o' Joshua, you're my game, Mister Black Vulcan!" was the astounding announcement that followed.

CHAPTER IV.

BOB BAYARD, THE HUNTER.

IN a densely-wooded valley half-encircled by an unbroken line of rocky palisades, stood the solitary cabin of Bob Bayard, the Black Mountain Hunter. Around and about the domicile grew stately pines and redwoods, and on the heights above, the feathery branches of great trees brushed the skies as they gently swayed in the September breeze.

Before this cabin a horseman drew rein one afternoon, and observing no sign of life about the place shouted aloud:

"Hullo! Bob, are you in there, old boy?"

The horseman was Ralph King, the Nabob Vagabond.

At once there came an answer to his call, not from within the cabin, but from the woods behind him:

"Here, old pard, I am; God bless you!"

Ralph turned, and his face lit up with a smile as he saw Bayard coming out of the woods, a rifle in one hand and a saddle of deer on his shoulder.

And a noble specimen of manhood was that same Bob Bayard. Over three-and-twenty years of age, though his beardless face gave him a much younger appearance, he was fully six feet in his moccasins, deep-chested, broad-shouldered and with the physical proportions of a Hercules.

Between this young hunter and Ralph King existed a friendship strong as the love of Jonathan and David. They had first met when Ralph was in the employ of the Government as surveyor. Bob had acted in the capacity of hunter and scout, and his intelligence, his great physical powers and courage, and his kind and jolly disposition at once attracted Ralph to him, and they thus became fast friends.

It had been six months since the two had met at Redwood Camp, and it was then that Ralph had promised to visit his friend in his mountain home, and he had now come to fulfill that promise.

Ralph dismounted, and the two young men greeted each other with clasped hands, and exchanged congratulations.

Then Bob put his gun and venison in the cabin, and took Ralph's horse and tied it out to grass in an opening some distance up the valley.

"I'd begun to think, Ralph, that you were never comin'," Bayard said, as he seated himself on a stool before his friend.

"I've not been in Redwood since we met, six months ago, until recently," Ralph replied. "I've been very busy down in New Mexico."

Bob indulged in an outburst of hearty good laughter.

"The idea of a 'Nabob' and a 'Vagabond' being busy pleases me," the hunter cried. "Oh, friend Ralph! I never supposed I'd hear you spoke of in such terms. 'The Nabob Vagabond' indeed! But say, Ralph, what have you been busy at? Have you taken to surveyin' again?"

"No; I've been riding 'round looking at the country," Ralph responded, somewhat evasively, "and having some good times. Just this morning I had 'a time,' but I can't say it was a pleasant one. I was compelled to lick a half a dozen or more miners of Redwood who were imposing on Old Moses, the Hermit. They don't seem to like me very well at the Basin, but then they'll get over that when they know me better. I expect to settle down there, for awhile, at least."

"Do you mean it, Ralph King?" exclaimed Big Bob.

"I do, Robert," answered Ralph. "I'm going into business with Uncle Hurry. He is getting old, and of late his health has been failing him. He has been a father to me in the past, and I feel it my duty to stand by him. He offers me a half-interest in all his ranches and his mine property if I will take charge of his business and give my entire time to it. Captain Darrow has been his foreman for years, but Cap's addicted somewhat to liquor, and uncle thinks it's growing on him. I know it'll be a disappointment to Darrow, for I rather think he's been expecting something more than a salary out of uncle's wealth, and I presume I shall incur his dislike, but I'm sure if I do, it will be a mutual dislike."

"Until Uncle Prosper's health has been recuperated sufficiently to enable him to go to some

more civilized place, I shall reside at Redwood Basin, and there I hope to see you often, Bobby. I have sent for my wife to—"

"Wife?" exclaimed Bayard, in astonishment; "do you mean to tell me you're married—got a wife, Ralph King?"

"I am happy to say, Robert, that I am the husband of the sweetest little woman in the world," Ralph answered.

"You villainous Nabob! you sly Vagabond!" young Bayard fairly shouted. "Why on earth haven't you told me of this before? Was you afraid to trust me?—afraid I'd steal your wife? Well, well! When did it happen? and where? You'd just as well make a clean and open-court confession."

"I married Miss May Hunter some time ago in Lincoln, Nebraska, and I have written her of my intentions of settling down in Redwood, and for her to pack up her traps and come on. I am to meet her in about two weeks from to-morrow at Drake Station on the Kansas Pacific, on preventing Providence."

"Well, I congratulate you, Ralph, my handsome Vagabond, on your new departure, and, just as soon as you get settled down, I'll run up to Redwood and visit a whole week with you and Mrs. Ralph."

"Better come up to stay," declared Ralph; "as long as you stay here you'll never hear the sweet, angelic voice of a woman. Come to Redwood, get you a wife and—"

"Hush, Ralph!" interrupted Bob, somewhat confused; "the idea of a big, awkward elephant like me gittin' married fairly scares me, and I know I'd scare a woman."

Thus the two friends talked until the shadows of night began to settle around them, when Bob lighted a fire and prepared supper, of which Ralph partook with hearty good relish.

That night they talked until late, not retiring to rest until near midnight.

They were out early next morning and the forenoon was spent in the woods.

After dinner Ralph bade his friend good-by and started on his return to Redwood Basin.

Bob watched him until he was out of sight and then, with a feeling of regret, returned to his cabin, procured his rifle and struck off into the hills.

It was dark when the young hunter returned, enriched by a handsome panther-skin.

As darkness deepened around him, Bob Bayard felt a sense of loneliness that he had never experienced before, and seating himself in his door gave himself up to reflection. Over and over in his mind he repeated nearly the last words of Ralph King:

"Bob, my boy, I wish you'd make up your mind to give up the life of a hunter, for as long as you stay here you will never hear the sound—the sweet angelic sound—of a lovely woman's voice."

Something in these words of his friend had awakened a new and peculiar feeling in his breast, and while he sat there, endeavoring to analyze this feeling, he was suddenly startled by a piercing scream.

In an instant the big hunter was on his feet, revolver in hand. He bent his head and listened, and in a moment there came to his ears the cry:

"Help! help! Oh, God! help!"

It was a woman's cry—a woman's distressed appeal!

It sent the red blood bounding through the veins of Bob Bayard, as he leaped away through the darkness in the direction whence the appeal had come.

CHAPTER V.

SOME STARTLING FACTS.

BOB BAYARD had taken but few steps to answer that appeal for help when he saw a vivid tongue of flame flashed through the darkness, heard the crack of a revolver and the death-cry of a victim wail out on the night.

The young hunter stopped short and listened. He heard the steps of hurrying feet, and two shadowy forms brushed past him. They seemed to be clad in female garments. They were breathing heavily. Bob turned and followed after them. Suddenly one of them sunk to the ground, crying out:

"Oh, Eva! I can go no further!"

This Bob heard, and he was no longer in doubt. They were female fugitives. He advanced, saying:

"Ladies, I'm Bob Bayard. You 'pear to be in trouble."

There was a momentary silence; then the answer came, from one of the fugitives:

"Can we trust you as a friend? We are fugitives from savage power, and fear our rescuer has been slain."

"Come with me," said Bob, in a tone of kindly assurance; "my cabin's close by, and I will give you shelter and protection."

"Oh, thank God!" murmured the woman that had fallen, as she staggered to her feet.

Bob took each by the arm and conducted them to his cabin. Leading them inside, he said:

"I'll strike a light."

He closed the door and lit the lamp. As its light fell upon the faces of the fugitives he could not suppress an exclamation of surprise. Both were young and handsome women, though fear and terror were written upon every feature of their white faces.

The eldest of the two could not have been over twenty years of age. She had a slender, graceful form, dark-blue eyes, and delicate and refined features.

The other was younger and not so tall. She had dark hair and eyes and a face of remarkable beauty.

Both were nicely and neatly dressed, which was evidence in itself that they had come from afar off.

At sight of the big hunter's honest and boyish face the fugitives seemed to draw a breath of relief, but the eldest was so weak that she could stand only by support of her companion. Seeing this, Bob gently took her by the arm, kindly saying:

"You are weary, miss; sit down on this bunk."

The woman sunk on the couch in sheer exhaustion.

"Now, ladies, you spoke 'bout Ingins," Bob said; "tell me if there are many of them about?"

"I do not know how many," replied the younger woman. "We have been in the power of four of them for three days, but at noon to-day an old hunter rescued us. He killed two of them, and we fled with him down the valley. The others must have followed us, for, just before we met you, we were attacked by some one, and I fear our noble old friend has been slain. They were fighting hard when we ran away."

"Then it must have been your friend that fired that shot a while ago?" Bob observed.

"Yes, sir," the girl answered.

"I shall go at once and look after him," Bob declared; "bolt the door, miss, after I go out, and don't open it until you hear four loud raps upon it."

Bob at once left the cabin, and the girl barred the door.

Ten minutes of dread waiting had passed when there came the four knocks; the door was quickly opened, and Bob stepped in, followed by a little old man in hunter's garb.

At sight of the latter the women uttered a cry of mingled joy and fear—joy at sight of their rescuer, but fear at sight of the blood upon his face.

Bob closed and bolted the door.

The little old borderer glanced at the women and spoke:

"Don't be skeered, gals; we're all right now, thank God!"

"But you have been wounded, Mr. Rattler," urged one of the girls.

"Only a little slash on the head," replied the old man; "only a mere scratch."

"Did I understand the young lady to call you Rattler?" Bob demanded, turning to the hunter.

"That's my name—Tom Rattler—the Red River Epidemic," answered the old fellow.

"Well, bless my soul! Tom Rattler, shake!" exclaimed Bob, grasping the noted Old Tom's hand. "I've heard of you, and am proud of the honor of your acquaintance. I am Bob Bayard, a kind of a hunter myself, and I welcome you and your charges to my humble roof."

"Thanks, young man, thanks!" responded Tom Rattler; "I tell you it's a glorious thing we struck here. The gals were 'bout fagged out, and if you've plenty o' grub, Bob, I think we can use some o' it."

"I've plenty, Tom, and you shall have the best," avowed Bob; "but I beg your pardon, ladies: would you mind telling me who you are?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Bayard," responded the younger of the two. "We are sisters; my name is Eva Hunter, and my sister's name is May King."

"King, did you say?" Bob questioned.

"Yes, sir," Miss Eva answered.

"A man named King just left my cabin to-day noon," Bob said; "he came up yesterday from Redwood, and stayed over-night with me."

"It could not have been Ralph King, could it?"

"It was Ralph King, and no other. Do you know—"

Bob was interrupted by a cry from the lips of May, who sunk in a swoon upon the floor.

"Poor May!" burst from Eva's lips. "Ralph King, Mr. Bayard, is her husband!"

CHAPTER VI.

DECOYED.

EVA HUNTER'S revelation fell like a thunder-bolt upon the ears of Bob Bayard. It seemed impossible for the fainting woman before him to be the wife of Ralph King. He stooped and lifted her inanimate form in his strong arms and laid her on his couch of furs, and then he and Eva applied restoratives and soon brought her to consciousness.

"Now, Miss Hunter," Bob said, "I want you to tell me how you come to be here in this outlandish country in the hands of savages."

"And while she's about it," subjoined Tom Rattler, "I'll run out and reconnoiter the woods."

Tom departed, and, seated on the side of May King's couch, Eva Hunter told this story:

"Ten days ago we were at our home in Lincoln, Nebraska. May was making preparations to start in about two weeks to join her husband, Ralph King, at Redwood Basin. But one day she received a telegram from Peach Springs saying Ralph was lying there dangerously ill, and to come at once. The dispatch was signed J. Farwell. I would say, also, that the same party wired May two hundred dollars, and this convinced her that Ralph was very ill."

"The news almost prostrated her, and she became so nervous over the matter that it was deemed best for me to accompany her. And so we started, and finally reached Peach Springs. There we were met at the train by Mr. John Farwell, Ralph's friend, who, to our regret, informed us that Ralph was at a mining-camp about ten miles from there, and was yet a very sick man."

"We were quite fatigued with our long railway journey, but announced our readiness to proceed to Ralph at once. A spring wagon with two seats and drawn by a pair of mules was brought around by a young man named Chester—a very pleasant and honest-looking fellow. Into his charge Farwell placed us, and we started off up the great mountain pass. Out about a mile from the station we overtook a footman whom Chester asked to ride, and the fellow got into the front seat with him."

"It was late when we left Peach Springs, but thoughts of danger never entered our minds until night came on and found us traveling in a deep, black defile, where the very echoes of our animals' hoofs sounded ominous. But the assurance of Chester that no danger need be apprehended allayed our uneasiness, and we kept on, and were, as our escort informed us, about three miles from the camp where Ralph lay sick, when, suddenly, the team was stopped by Indians, and what took place for the next ten minutes I cannot tell you definitely. I know our escort made a pretense, at least, of defense. Several shots were fired, and I have a vague remembrance of hearing bullets whistle over our heads. But the outcome of it all was that we were compelled to abandon the wagon and go away with the Indians. What became of Chester and the other man, I know not."

"All that night we were hurried away through the desolate hills, and at daylight came to an Indian camp of some thirty warriors and one young and pretty squaw. Here we were given food and permitted to rest some hours. When we were again put on the march we were mounted on ponies and escorted by four warriors and the young squaw, who, speaking English plainly, said her name was Vine."

Tents and food and most of our personal effects were carried along on pack-ponies, and when night again set in we encamped near a well. A tent was erected for us, and we were placed therein under the especial charge of the Indian girl. We had been treated as kindly as, I presume, it is possible for savages to treat a captive. The only insult we were subjected to was from the girl, Vine. She stripped us of our jewelry—two ladies' gold watches, four rings, and our breast-pins—all of which she decorated her little savage self with.

"The next morning our journey was resumed. Nothing of note occurred that day. We were

still treated kindly, Vine attending our every want and never for a moment leaving our presence.

"At noon on the third day of our journey—to-day, in fact, we halted some distance from here in a very dark defile. While there we were permitted to walk around, Vine, however, staying close at our side.

"We were about fifty yards from the camp when we were suddenly confronted by a little old man who seemed to rise out of the earth.

"Girls," he quickly said, "I'm Tom Rattler, the hunter; are you captives?"

"We are," May answered.

"Then come with me, and I'll die before they get you again."

"As he thus spoke, Vine seized both of us by the arm and screamed like a young tigress; but Old Tom broke her hold upon us and pushed her away. We then ran with all our speed down the valley, the old hunter following close behind.

"The Indians pursued, but whenever they came within reach of his rifle the hunter turned and fired; and at every shot a death-wail told how deadly had been his aim.

"With two of the Indians dead, the others appeared to give up the pursuit, and we thought we were entirely rid of them, until a few minutes ago we were attacked again in the dark—by those same two red-skins, I suppose."

"The red devils were foolin' with the wrong man when they tackled Tom Rattler," Bob remarked. "I never saw him before, but I've heard he was a holy screamer."

"He is a kind, brave and gallant old man," May King declared; "but, Mr. Bayard, the fact of Ralph having been here to-day well and hearty, convinces me that he has enemies that have decoyed us, by that telegram, into this country for some devilish purpose. And that man, Farwell, must have been that villain, or the pliant tool of an arch conspirator."

"It won't be well for the wretches when Ralph King gets on their trail," averred Bob; "and if the Lord spares us we'll have him after them before many days."

At this juncture Tom Rattler came in, reporting the coast clear. When asked what he thought about the abduction of the women by a false telegram, he replied:

"The weemin told me all about it, and I made up my mind that it's the work of some low-lived hellyons. What they expect to accomplish by it I don't know, but I'd give a tooth if Old Kit Bandy was round to work the thing out. Old Kit's a lily-lipped hummer when he gits after rogues—as fanciful an ole liar and deceiver as—"

His remarks were cut short by a soft tapping upon the door. In an instant all was silence. Bob finally advanced toward the door, when Old Tom said, in a whisper:

"Be keerful, boy; it may be treachery demandin' admittance."

The knock on the door was repeated.

Bob moved his lady guests into the corner back of the door, posted Old Tom with drawn revolver, and then shading the lamp so that its rays would fall alone upon the entrance, he withdrew the bar and opened the door.

Then, to the surprise of all, the lithe figure of an Indian girl came softly into the room, glancing warily around her like a timid fawn. Her head was bare, and her long black hair hung in braids at her back. A Navajo shawl of bright colors was around her waist, golden chains were about her neck, and upon one hand flashed no less than four hoops of gold.

"It's Vine!" burst from Eva Hunter's lips, at sight of the dusky maid, "our Indian-girl attendant. Do not, I beg, harm her, for she was kind to us!"

Bob closed and bolted the door.

"By the Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler, "it are that pretty little Ingin wildcat that I found guardin' the gals. You little heifer, what are you doin' here?"

"Come to bring white girls their jewels," Vine responded, and advancing to where Eva and May stood, she removed the rings, one by one, from her fingers, and handed them to their owners.

Then she gave back their watches, and having made this restitution, she seemed to breathe an air of relief, and turned toward the door.

"Vine," said May, seeing she meant to depart, "you must not go away to-night. Stay with us, and we will be your friends as you were ours."

"My people have been your enemies," the maid replied, as she paused and glanced at May and Eva.

"That makes no difference," responded May; "you are not to blame for that."

"Not a bit o' it, little gal," put in Old Tom. "You jist set down and make yerself to home, and I'll make love to you arter a while. I like pretty gals nearly as wuss as Old Kit Bandy used to."

Whether Vine fully comprehended what Old Tom said or not, the way he said it seemed to set the girl at ease, for she drew her shawl closer about her and sat down by May on the bunk.

Thus another guest had been, for a while at least, added to the household of the Mountain Hunter.

CHAPTER VII.

EXCITEMENT IN REDWOOD.

If the self-proclaimed Black Vulcan had created any surprise in the mind of Old Moses, it was now his turn to experience a similar feeling in the presence of the self-proclaimed Kit Bandy and his derringer. Nor could the outlaw conceal his emotions. He seemed like one instantly paralyzed in body. The flash of his eyes was subdued, and he drew a quick, short breath as if a heavy weight had suddenly fallen upon his chest. There was a slight backward toss of the head and a convulsive jerking of the arms, as if the muscles refused to respond to the will-power of their owner.

That Old Moses could have wrought such a transformation seemed miraculous; but it was in this phenomenal faculty of masking his real person that lay the success of the great Mountain Detective.

With his tall form now erect, and his hitherto dull eyes ablaze with a fierce flame; with that horrible derringer held in a steady hand; the sudden change had affected the robber like a powerful electric shock.

Judge Hurry was also astounded by the transformation, but, as his surprise produced in him a sense of joy instead of fear, he quickly recovered his presence of mind and springing to his feet, exclaimed:

"Curse you, Black Vulcan! you've met your match at last!"

The movement of the old ranchman and his words served to break the spell that for a few brief moments had rendered the robber motionless, for, dropping the bag of coin, he sprang backward toward the open door, at the same time grasping his revolver and attempting to shoot Old Kit. But he was not quick enough for the veteran detective, whose pistol rung out, and the outlaw's arm fell, limp and helpless, at his side, while the revolver dropped from his now nerveless fingers.

With a curse that was half-stifled by a cry of pain, the robber reeled from the cabin into the night. Bandy picked up the villain's revolver and sprang out in pursuit, but the sudden change from light to darkness made the gloom impenetrable to the eye. The old detective stopped and listened. He heard the tramping of hooved feet under the trees to his right, and started in that direction; but, all at once, the sound broke into the clatter of galloping hoofs, and to his dismay he realized that the ruffian robber had, after all, escaped.

Returning to the cabin, where Hurry had by this time been joined by Old Jasper and his wife, who had been aroused by the report of Bandy's pistol, he said:

"Judge, the varlet's escaped, after all, but he goes without the money and one gun short; and I think I clipped his right wing the way it dropped when my popper popped."

"May Satan finish the scoundrel!" the old ranchman exclaimed. "I'm glad to get off as well as I did. You've played the hermit well, my friend, and if you're Kit Bandy—"

"I'm Kit Bandy, all right enough, judge," broke in the old detective, as he proceeded to remove a wig and false beard, so cleverly adjusted that no one had ever mistrusted them of being a disguise. "There," he went on, "you behold the clean-cut and original Karistopher Columbus Bandy in all his peerless beauty."

"Fore de Lord! you's uglier 'n my ole man!" exclaimed Old Jasper's wife in astonishment.

"Aunty," responded Kit, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "I war once a handsome man, but my beauty war crucified by a rantankerous wife, and I'd tell you 'bout her if I'd time. But, it's a bit skittish 'round here now, and the camp must be 'roused or the followers o' that robber may undertake to avenge his clipped wing if they should be hoverin' about—ah! here's Mother Isaac, now!"

True enough, the little old miner, Mother Ike,

had entered the room unannounced, and quiet as a cat.

"I heard a pistol up this way and I came up to see 'bout it," the miner explained. "What's the rumpus?"

Old Kit having introduced himself as all that remained of the once meek and decrepit Old Moses, related the story of the encounter with Black Vulcan.

Then Mother Ike rushed out and aroused the camp, and in a short time Ben Hall, the marshal, and half the entire camp, were gathered at "The Retreat."

Kit Bandy became the center of attraction now, and many were the "I told you so's" that were whispered around among the miners, while those who had, on the previous Sunday, attempted to force liquor on the old man, became profuse in apologies for the insult.

Old Kit readily forgave them all with the final observation that if any of them wanted to repeat the insult he was just then in a frame of mind to accept it as a favor, or rather as a nerve.

There was some talk of pursuing the outlaw, but it was only talk. Kit advised them to make some arrangements to guard against an attack of Black Vulcan's whole gang, rather than, in the absence of horses, to undertake to follow the brigand.

Acting upon this advice the miners, accompanied by Kit, repaired to The Combine where there was ample room for the crowd.

The marshal was made chairman of the meeting.

"I should like to hear first, Mr. Chairman," said Mohave Jim, "from the noted Kit Bandy. He hain't been shadowin' Redwood for some months without an object in view; and furthermore, without having made some discovery of a suspicious nature."

"I never," quickly spoke up Bandy, "talk out loud when I'm tryin' to put salt on a bird's tail."

"But," persisted Mohave Jim, "you must have been a little suspicious or else you wouldn't have been at Judge Hurry's cabin to-night."

"That just happened so," Kit replied; "for it's the third night Old Moses had staid there by the judge's invitation, since the boys tried to moisten the hermit's lips—since his nabob o' nephew went off on a visit to Bob Bayard's."

"Mr. Bandy," said Gila Bill, "I'd like to ax you one question: hasn't Ralph King's goin' away from camp and Black Vulcan's visit here to-night struck you as bein' a peculiar coincidence?"

"Ah! I see," answered Kit; "you mistrust the young nabob, as you call him, o' bein' Black Vulcan. Well, stranger things might happen. The fellow was so thorough, disguised that I didn't detect anything familiar 'bout him if he was the Vagabond; nor did he detect anything peculiar 'bout Old Moses. But, by the ram's horn o' Joshua! he's got a sore arm whoever he be!"

Seeing that Bandy was too cautious to express an opinion, no further questions were asked him, and the miners entered upon a full and free discussion of the matter before them.

It soon became clear to Old Kit that the feeling of the camp was strongly against Ralph King. Every one had a kind word for Judge Hurry, but most of them decided that he had been too indulgent with his scalawag nephew, and that, in standing by him, and in taking him into his business interests as a partner, he had taken a serpent into his household. Mohave Jim thought a committee should be sent to lay the feelings of the camp in the matter before the judge, in plain words; and then, if he persisted in harboring a man about him who would rather rob him of a few thousand dollars and be a free, roving brigand, than to possess many thousands and settle down to hard labor, he might take the consequences.

As Mohave's suggestion was indorsed by a majority vote, he and "Woolly" Sands were selected to call on the judge, and they at once departed for The Retreat.

They found the old ranchman pacing the floor of his room, a revolver in his hand. He received them kindly, and the three sat down together.

Mohave Jim was spokesman for the committee. He was an easy, fluent talker, and very adroit in making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

At first Judge Hurry flew into a passion, and came very nearly ordering the committee out of his house. But the committee kept serenely cool, and succeeded in quieting the old man down, and in finally prevailing on him to withhold judgment until the matter could be inves-

tigated to the bottom. While they were still talking Kit Bandy came in, a broad smile upon his face.

"Kit," said the Judge, turning to the old detective, "what do you advise me to do?"

"Send at once for your foreman, Captain Darrow, and half a dozen well armed and trusty cowboys, and I'll help them to follow Black Vulcan to the Gulf o' California, be he your relative or the devil. But I wouldn't borrow any trouble, judge. Your nephew, you say, went to visit Bob Bayard, and was to be home in a few days. Now, if he returns with a sore arm, or stays away long enough for a sore arm to heal up, in either case, it will look a little suspicious. But send at once for Darrow and a few cowboys, and we'll give the Desert Pirates a rustle jist for the fun o' it. In the mornin' I'll do a bit o' reconnoiterin', and see if I can determine the course taken by the outlaw in his flight from here. He'll have to lay up some'ers for repairs."

While the old man was thus speaking Mohave Jim and Woolly Sands were observed to exchange glances.

"I believe your suggestions are in the right, Kit," assented the ranchman, "and I'll act upon them at once. Mr. Burns, will you take my horse and ride to Sand Creek Ranch with a message to Darrow?"

"With pleasure, judge," promptly responded Mohave Jim, for it was he the judge addressed as "Mr. Burns." "I will start to-night—right away."

In the course of an hour Mohave had made his arrangements, and mounted upon Hurry's favorite horse, rode out of Redwood Basin on his mission to Sand Creek.

Kit Bandy left the judge's house, saying he had promised to spend the rest of the night with his friend, Mother Ike, who had been taken suddenly ill.

Ben Hall came and staid with the judge, and in the course of an hour or so quiet once more settled down over Redwood Camp and The Retreat.

Ben Hall laid down and soon fell asleep, but the judge would not retire. He put out the light, and sat down in his arm-chair with his revolver in his lap ready for any emergency.

But, in spite of himself, the unbroken silence lulled him into slumber. When he awoke, he started up with a cry. A glaring red light flamed in at the window. At first he thought it was the light of the rising sun, but, upon advancing to the window, he looked and beheld the isolated cabin of Mother Ike in flames. The roof had already fallen in, and the walls were one mass of fire.

Arousing Ben Hall, he and the judge hurried down toward the burning building. Only three or four shouting miners reached the fire before them.

"Where's Kit Bandy? where's Mother Ike?" the judge demanded, when he saw neither the old detective nor the miner around.

No one answered, for no one knew.

"My God! I fear they have been burned up alive!" the old ranchman cried.

The sickening smell of burning flesh filled the air, strengthening the old man's fears, and when at length the door fell from its hinges a horrible, ghastly sight was revealed to the eyes of the excited group.

On the floor inside, bloated by the heat and repulsive in disfigurement, lay a human body, whose naked form and blackened face the flames were still seeking to devour.

But only for a moment was this horrible sight permitted, for the walls of the cabin fell in, burying all in one mass of roaring flames.

"Great heavens!" groaned Judge Hurry, as he turned away sick at heart; "that ends the career of Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN AND BABY IN CAMP.

THE supposed cremation of Kit Bandy and Mother Ike cast a short-lived gloom over Redwood Camp, for with the return of day the subject of the attempted robbery of Judge Hurry became almost the sole topic of discussion. To add to the excitement of the day Mohave Jim, accompanied by three cowboys from Sand Creek Ranch, returned with the startling information that Captain Darrow had not returned to the ranch since his last visit. His riderless horse had been caught in the foot-hills, and the only conclusion to be arrived at was that he had been murdered by the Desert Pirates, several of whom were reported to have been seen a few days previous entering the hills.

A party was at once organized and sent out to

search for the captain, or some trace of him, at least.

Judge Hurry's troubles were multiplying. He knew a storm was gathering in Redwood Basin. A Vigilance Committee was organized that day, and unusual activity prevailed in and about "The Combine."

Along in the afternoon a stranger called at Judge Hurry's house and introduced himself as Richard Sheldahl. He was a man of five-and-thirty years, dressed in a neat citizen's suit of gray, and with the air of a professional person.

"I do not remember of having ever met you before, Mr. Sheldahl," the old ranchman said, after some reflection.

"No, you have not, judge," he replied. "I just came into Redwood on the weekly stage, or hack, I should call it, that carries your mail and chance passengers; and I regret to find your camp in a state of great excitement, and your nephew's name mixed up in the excitement in a very unpleasant manner."

"Ah! then you know Ralph King, Mr. Sheldahl?"

"I should say so, judge, since he is the husband of my sister," responded the visitor; "and, what is more, she and her baby are now in camp at The Combine."

"The nation, you say!" exclaimed Hurry, in surprise. "Ralph told me he was married, and that he would send for his wife soon, but he said nothing about a child, confound him! I reckon he wanted to treat me to a surprise."

"He wrote for her to come on and join him here," Sheldahl explained, "and also asked me to accompany her as he was very busy."

"Busy the dickens!" blurted the old ranchman—"busy gadding about the country and thereby getting his name mixed up with that of—of freebooters!"

"There's the letter he wrote her at Lincoln, Nebraska, asking her to come to him here at once," and Sheldahl handed him the missive, which the old man carefully read and re-read.

"The rascal!" he said, when he had finished the letter. "Ralph is an odd boy. But, why didn't you bring the woman and child up here? Here's Ralph's home, whether he has disgraced us all or not."

"Ralph has been somewhat unsettled, I must confess," Sheldahl responded; "he has been constantly on the wing since he married Aimee, being with her only a week or two at a time; but, while his movements have been somewhat mysterious, I do not believe he is an outlaw, much less Black Vulcan, who attempted to rob you."

"If he is Black Vulcan he was disguised so that I did not recognize one single feature," declared the judge; "and, besides, he's got a terrible sore arm, for Bandy banged the robber hard. But, Mr. Sheldahl, go bring his wife up here. It's not a fit place for a woman at The Combine."

"I'll do so with pleasure."

And Sheldahl took his departure.

The judge called in Old Mandy and bade her put the house in order for the coming of Ralph's wife and baby, and while she was thus engaged the judge put on his best suit and made ready to welcome the visitors.

Sheldahl soon returned with the woman and child, and the judge received them with a warm welcome.

Aimee King was a young woman of twenty-two, slender and graceful, with dark hair and eyes, and features decidedly handsome. She was pleasant and lady-like in her address, and at once won the judge's confidence.

As for the baby, he was a little dimpled bit of humanity, over which Hurry and Old Mandy became enraptured.

Nothing was said at that time about the ugly suspicion with which Ralph's name was being coupled. On the contrary, the judge evaded every topic likely to cause the woman any distress.

Shortly after Aimee's arrival at The Retreat a young man rode into camp from Sand Creek Ranch. It was Charley Little, or Little Lasso, as he was called, one of the judge's trusted cowboys.

He had come to Redwood with a message for the judge, and, as it was a matter of minor importance, the judge concluded to send the boy after Ralph King.

Little Lasso being perfectly willing to go, he received his instructions and departed for the mountain home of Bob Bayard.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly at The Retreat. Mr. Sheldahl remained until after supper at the judge's, and then returned to The Combine, promising to come back in the morning.

The judge and his niece and Old Jasper and his wife talked on until quite late in the night. It must have been near eleven o'clock when, suddenly, there came a sharp, quick rap! rap! on the door.

"Come in!" called out the old ranchman in the usual Western way, at the same time reaching for his revolver, in the usual Western style also, a vivid recollection of a caller he had had the night before flashing through his mind.

The door quickly swung open, and, to the astonishment of all, a form clad in female garments crossed the threshold and stood before them, saying:

"Good-evening, people! Could a poor, weary, heart-broken female woman git lodgin' here for one blessed night?"

Judge Hurry was completely astounded. The woman was quite old, despite her elastic step. She was clad in a plain calico dress. A dilapidated sun-bonnet was upon her head, an old faded shawl around her shoulders. Her hair was almost white and combed low on her forehead and temples.

In her hand she carried a gaunt-looking, threadbare sachel. Her wrinkled face was so bronzed that the judge at first took her for an Indian squaw. But her voice told him differently.

"Madam," he said, "I could not turn a woman away from my roof, though I am astonished that one should come here at this time—a woman of your age, too. Who are you? and whence came you, anyhow?"

The woman pushed back her bonnet and, in a clear, falsetto voice, replied:

"I am Sabina, the legally wedded, yet cruelly deserted wife of that infamous old scoundrel, Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

CHAPTER IX.

A WRONGED WOMAN.

JUDGE HURRY was completely astounded by his visitor's announcements and the vigorous language employed in making the same. For a few moments he was at loss for words to reply, when Old Mandy came to his assistance, saying:

"Missus, you jis' take off yoah bonnit an' shawl and sot right down an' res' yoahself."

Old Sabina sat down, but she did not remove her bonnet or shawl, nor would she permit Mandy to do so.

"You're a brave woman, Mrs. Bandy," Hurry finally observed, "to be travelin' in these parts alone."

"Bless my soul!" the old woman exclaimed, with snapping eyes, "I'm not afeard o' anything that goes on two or four feet! A woman that's been tortured as I have loses all sense of fear. I live only for sweet, sweet revenge! Just let me clap my eyes and these hands on Kit Bandy and he'll wish he'd never won my girlish heart, only to cast it aside and go gallavantin' around over the hemisphere, flirtin' with other weemin and pertendin' to be a detective!"

Instead of being serious, the situation had now become somewhat amusing and ludicrous, and the judge and Aimee could scarcely keep straight faces.

"Had you heard, Mrs. Bandy, that your husband had been in this camp?" Hurry next inquired.

"I trailed him from Tombstone this way, and got wind of an old hermit callin' hisself Moses, that I thought might be Old Kit," she replied.

"What if I should tell you, madam, that your husband had been here, and that you are a widow?"

"A real widder, or a grasser?"

"A real widow—that your husband is dead?" he said, shocked at her unfeeling and rude language.

"It would be far more satisfaction," she replied, "to know he was in his grave, dead, than to never know where he is alive, and then it'd end my tramping around forever huntin' arter him."

"Wal, madam," the judge finally blurted out, "you are a real widow—your husband is dead—was burned to death last night in this camp."

"Dead!" the old woman cried; "oh! woe, woe is me!" and she rocked to and fro, moaning in genuine anguish. "Poor, miserable old man!" she went on; "that all comes of his desartin' my bed and board without cause or provocation; but there's no great loss without some small gain: I'll have some rest now, please the merciful Father! Oh, dear! dear!"

Sabina continued weeping to and fro, wringing her hands and moaning. She gradually worked herself into a frenzy of grief and rage that fairly alarmed the judge, and at length, when on the verge of an hysterical fit, she

grasped her sachel and broke for the door, gasping out:

"I must have air!—I'm smotherin'!—chokin'!"

She rushed out into the night. Judge Hurry quickly followed her, calling loudly on her to stop.

Twenty or thirty feet from the door he came up with her, when the woman grasped him by the arm, and in a low tone—almost a whisper—asked:

"Judge, will you keep a secret?"

"If you wish to intrust a secret to me, I'll surely keep it," responded the judge, somewhat perplexed by the sudden change in the woman's tone and actions.

"That beautiful woman in your house is Ralph King's wife, is she not?" interrogated the old woman.

"Yes, she claims to be, at any rate," the old ranchman replied, wondering what next was to come.

"Here, judge, is a paper for you. Read it and keep its contents to yourself. As to that fair woman, watch her close. If Ralph King is a Desert Pirate, she is a beautiful serpent and her sting will be death!"

And having placed a paper in the judge's hand and uttered those startling words of warning, Sabina Bandy glided away from the dumfounded old man into the night and he never saw her again.

CHAPTER X.

THE BROKEN TREE TRAGEDY.

BOB BAYARD, the hunter, fully realized the responsibility resting upon him in caring for the woman claiming to be Ralph King's wife, and her pretty sister; but with help of the gallant Old Tom Rattler, he felt himself fully equal to the occasion for the present, at least.

It was arranged to start with the women next morning for Redwood Basin, but when morning came it found May King prostrate with a burning fever, and the start had to be postponed. That day passed and the next, but while May was much better, it was feared she would not be able to stand the journey afoot; and so the men decided that one of them should go at once to Redwood, and inform Ralph King of his wife's presence there in the hunter's cabin, and have him come with horses and an escort to her assistance.

Old Rattler volunteered to make the trip, and about the middle of the forenoon bade Bob and the women good-by, and started away on his journey with the sprightly step of youth, instead of a man of sixty-odd years.

His road lay along a winding defile that alternated between open, grassy and wooded parks, and narrow, canyon-like passages.

To reach Redwood, as the crow flies, was not over about forty miles, but the sinuosity of the course he would have to follow would add several miles to the trip.

The invincible old man covered mile after mile with wonderful rapidity. Not a moment did he stop, eating his cold lunch on the move. He wished to make "Broken Tree" Park, where Bob had told him was a well, before dark. There he expected to rest until morning.

But it was two hours after dark before he reached the park, and then it was to meet with a startling surprise. The defile had not opened gradually into the park, but maintained its narrowness to the very edge of the valley into which Old Tom advanced, only to start back in to the shadows of the defile at the sight that met his eyes.

Broken Tree Park was a sparsely-wooded opening of forty or fifty acres in area. A few trees were scattered about over the place and a few rods to the right of the point where Old Tom had entered, stood the tree from which the park took its name. It was a tree whose top had been broken off at some period in the past. That had stopped its upward growth, but the lower branches had grown all the faster, and were out of all proportion in length to the height of the tree.

Near this tree was a spring, or as they are more properly termed in Arizona, a well. The place had long been a camping-place for whoever chanced to pass that way. And there Tom expected to rest until morning, but he found the place already occupied. A bright camp-fire was burning near the big tree, flinging its rays out almost to the entrance of the pass.

Within the radius of light he discovered six persons—all men. Five of them were standing around the sixth, who sat upon a horse, his head bare and his hands tied behind his back.

Two of the five were rough-bearded men. The faces of the other three were covered with black

cloths with eye-holes, which very fact convinced Old Tom at a glance that they were villains—outlaws—no doubt a part of Black Vulcan's Desert Pirates.

The man on horseback, Tom could also see, was a beardless youth of but eighteen or twenty. In fact, he was the young ranchero, Little Lasso, whom Judge Hurry had sent after Ralph King, and he was a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws.

But, what did the villains mean to do with the boy? This was the question now uppermost in Rattler's mind, and he determined to know if possible.

So he stole from the pass, and, keeping under cover of the darkness, crept with all the stealth of a cat to within earshot of the party.

Then he listened, and from what he heard and saw he soon learned that the young ranchero's life was to be sacrificed, but for what he knew not. One end of a long lariat was already around the youth's neck, and the horse he bestrode standing under the broken tree which was to be used as a gallows.

Finally an outlaw was heard to say, to a companion:

"Shinbone, you skin up that tree and adjust the rope to a limb."

The man thus addressed, a lithe, sinewy fellow, tied the free end of the rope around his waist and started up the tree like a cat.

It was fully twenty-five feet to the first limb, and Shinbone had no sooner reached this than he was lost to view in the deep, dense foliage; but, seeing the rope moving out from the tree-trunk, Tom knew the robber was crawling along a limb to a point over the crowd below.

When about ten feet from the tree the rope ceased to move, and then the slack was taken up until it seemed almost taut.

"All right," were the words which presently came down from the foliage.

"Now, then, young man," said the bearded villain who was holding the horse on which Little Lasso sat, "we'll give you one more chance to save your neck by makin' a clean breast of all you know."

"You've had my answer, and I'll tell you nothing!" was the brave youth's defiant retort, which at once won the admiration of Tom Rattler's heroic old heart, and, regardless of the odds, or what the result might be, he resolved to save the fearless boy's life, or at least make the attempt.

But before the old borderman had scarcely formed this resolution, a horrible cry of agony burst from the foliage of the tree, and the next instant the body of Shinbone shot headforemost from the darkness above and fell with a fearful thump on the earth behind the horse.

Three of the outlaws hastened to the side of their fallen friend, the fourth having all he could do to hold the animal that had been frightened by the man's fall.

Old Tom's quick mind readily perceived that a favorable opportunity for carrying out his designs was now offered, but again, before he could act, his attention was attracted by a pair of long legs clad in buckskin dangling from the dense foliage above alongside the rope, and those legs were, as they descended, followed by the body and head of a man, who, clutching the rope, shot toward the earth like a meteor. But he never reached the ground. With his long legs well forked, he landed behind Little Lasso squarely astride the horse, and not until he was thus seated did the outlaw holding the animal observe his presence.

This unexpected and additional weight upon the horse's back gave the animal new fear, and as the outlaw had his hands full with it, he shouted like a madman to his friends, who were totally ignorant of what had happened.

So rapidly did one event follow another in the exciting drama that Old Tom's mind could scarcely comprehend the situation. The long-legged giant that had dropped from above had no sooner bestrode the horse than the rope about the young ranchero's neck swung to and fro, its lower end free. At the same instant the horse whirled around, bringing the outlaw holding it to his side, and just as the villain set up his mad shout, his stomach came in contact with the big foot of the well-forked giant, and he fell doubled up on the earth completely out of breath.

And the horse thus freed of restraining hands, bounded away like mad with its double burden into the shadows, while all the three startled outlaws were enabled to do was to send a dozen random revolver-shots after them, gaze into each other's faces, and at the writhing form of their leader on the ground, in mute surprise and terror!

CHAPTER XI.

OLD PERSIMMONS.

OLD TOM RATTLER witnessed the escape of the boy and his daring rescuer with a degree of satisfaction that almost found expression in a shout of joy, and when he saw the outlaw that had been deprived of breath rising to his feet and gazing around him and at his friends in apparent bewilderment, the old hunter indulged in a fit of silent laughter that started the perspiration from every pore.

And, while Old Tom was overwhelmed with joy, Little Lasso was undergoing a most startling and happy surprise. The fall of Shinbone he supposed had been accidental, and not until his rescuer had swung against him in his descent was the boy aware of the presence of a friend.

The cutting of the rope around his neck and the kick in the outlaw's stomach seemed to have been done in one motion and in one instant, and then they were off like the wind, the still unknown rescuer releasing his hands as they sped away.

Not a word had been spoken by either of them until the boy felt his hands free; then his friend said:

"There, now, lad; git hold o' the reins and stop the critter afore he bu'sts his b'iler and jumps out from under us!"

Still speechless with surprise and wonder, Little Lasso mechanically obeyed, and with little difficulty succeeded in checking the mad speed of the frightened horse. When he had accomplished this he glanced back over his shoulder, saying:

"Well, who are you, anyhow?"

The boy's face was close to that of his rescuer, but in the darkness he could see nothing but the outlines of the man's head which was a few inches above his own. The stranger indulged in a low, chuckling laugh, then replied:

"I'm Ole Persimmons, I are, and didn't I pucker them two warmints in colossal shape? Didn't that man Shinbone hit the ground with the regelation 'dull, sickenin' thud'? Didn't that other trooper curl beautifully when my foot found his grub-basket?"

"I declare!" returned the astonished youth, "I hardly know what was done, it was done so quick. Were you up in that tree, Mr.—Mr. Persimmons?"

"I war thar, my boy—had gone up 'bout sunset and curled myself up in my sleepin' hammock for the night. You see, I'm afeard to sleep on the ground on 'count o' snakes and wild animals, so I bushed. They woke me with their racket, and when that feller came up to adjust the rope, I pricked him once in the vicinity o' the aorta, and he flopped off the limb like a stunned woodpecker. Then I did the rope-act, but the inside o' my hands are smokin' yit, so hot war that riata— But, harkee, boy, the varlets are comin' arter us like Satan poundin' tan-bark! Gee off to the right across the park and let 'em pass. They'll think we're fled up the canyon, and 'll keep on arter their fool noses till daylight thinkin' they'll git us."

The boy turned his horse, and they rode westward.

The sound of the pursuing hoofs passed on up the park and died away in the pass leading eastward.

Then Old Persimmons slipped to the ground, saying:

"We're all right now, boy."

Little Lasso dismounted, also, and, taking his rescuer by the hand, said:

"I want to thank you now, Mr. Persimmons, for saving my life, and that, too, at an awful risk of your own."

"Don't mention it, boy," responded the man, with a laugh; "I'd fun enough out o' the affair to pay me two dollars on the hundred cents!"

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed the boy; "you must be a dandy; but, say: is your name really Persimmons?"

"No; come to think, it's Kit Bandy."

"Surely you must be mistaken, again; Kit Bandy was burned up in a miner's cabin in Redwood last night," observed the young ranchero, somewhat puzzled.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Bandy, for he the man was; "I thought I'd fool them Redwood-ites. I wanted to fool 'em a while, but I reckon they'll not spill any tears over my unburned ashes. There's some wicked warmints in Redwood, boy, and one o' them—a cross between a Gila monster and Piute Ingin—called 'Centipede,' crawled into Mother Ike's cabin and attempted to assassinate me. But he got it in the neck hisself and never kicked after'ds. Then I seed there was a conspiracy on foot to leave me, and so I pervailed on Mother Ike to leave

Redwood, and we set fire to the cabin and departed. I reckon 'Centipede' got roasted. I'm sure it weren't me, for I'm right here in the full bloom o' vigorous manhood, ready for anything from a grizzly bear to a gang o' Desert Pirates, by the horn o' Joshua!"

"Well, I'll be hung!" declared Little Lasso, "if I wouldn't like to see Kit Bandy in the light. I've heard he was a lally, but I don't believe that expresses it by any means."

"Suppose we move down and take possession o' the outlaws' bivouac? They won't need it ag'in to-night, and we'll let the light o' their camp-fire beam upon our Roman faces."

To this proposition the boy readily consented, and they started across the park toward the broken tree, where they could still see a faint glow from the outlaws' camp-fire.

"You'll not look upon a classical face, boy," Old Kit said, as they neared the camp. "I tell you now so's you won't be disappointed when we strike the light. I was handsome once, they say, but I war horrible disfiggered in a matrimonial combat—in gettin' married."

"Indeed! then you're a married man?" exclaimed the boy.

"I was—I am—I am not," was the contradictory reply. "Boy, marryin' made a mountain tramp o' me. In an evil hour, I, a young and confidin' and foolish youth of twenty-five, led Sabina Ellen Frisby to the hyeneal altar, the happiest man in all America. But before the honeymoon had waxed into its third quarter there was an eclipse of—one of my eyes; lightnin' begun to flicker along the horizon domestic, and thunder rattled and banged round and 'bout my castle o' love."

"I took my bonny bride into a palatial little home that I'd erected outen the purest virgin sod in the Chugwater Valley, and kivered with as noble, stately verdure as ever waved in green billows or rustled in the gentle Chinook. Parian marble, quarried right in sight o' our home, made steps to our door. I spared no pains to adorn the walls of our drawin'-room and parlor with works o' art—pictures from the hands o' the Old Masters of—the *Weekly Sleeping Guardian's Gazette*. Furs o' Russian sable, caught on Bonnet Creek, I laid at Sabina's feet in wild confusion. Fresh and juicy venison I always kept on my table. I also kept a two-gallon jug o' anti-malaria on hand that I might ward off from my dove the insidious malaria that lurked at times along the classic Chug like a hungry wolf."

"Oh, I tried to be a model husband and generous neighbor, but she—my wife Sabina—was a jealous monster—wuss'n ole Green Eye herself. We'd a good neighbor livin' 'bout a mile away—Welcome Losh by name. Welcome had a sweet little girl baby o' 'bout eighteen summers, and she used to toddle down to our manse to visit. I alers liked children, and to hear their innocent prattle, and so I'd take little Linda on my knee and trot, trot to Boston town and sich. I see'd Sabina didn't like that, and so I let up on that and jist treated her kindly and fatherly-like."

"One day little Linda came to our house and said her father was down sick with malaria, and wanted to know if I'd please loan him a quart o' anti till he could get to the station. She asked so pretty that I couldn't say no, and so filled her quart bottle, and she smiled and said, 'Thank you, you dear, kind man,' and then she left for home."

"An hour afterward I thought I'd run up and see how Neighbor Losh was gettin' along, and kissed Sabina and sailed out. 'Bout half a mile from my dove-cote I came suddenly upon the prostrate form o' poor little Linda Losh! She lay silent and motionless, starin' up at the blue sky, to all appearances dead. The bottle she'd got the medicine in lay by her side, nighly half its contents gone—leaked out through a hole in the cork. I made up my mind she'd been frightened to death or into a swoon by some wild animal that crossed her path. I knelt down and took her motionless form up in my arms. Then I found she war not dead. Her head dropped back limp-like, and she gazed with hazy eyes up into mine."

"My poor, dear child," I said, tenderly, "what on earth's frightened you so? Rouse up! speak to me, Linda."

"She wiped her mouth with her little hand and said something 'bout 'Ingin summer,' a 'bilt owl,' and 'spinnin' round.' She spoke very incoherently, and I bowed my head to catch each word, and jist then somethin' fell onto me. I saw a shower o' stars and a confusion of things I can't describe. When I come to, only one eye was on duty—the other havin' been eclipsed, and before me I saw Sabina, my

wife, standin', club in hand, like Johan o' Ark-ansas, while off in the dim distance I could see a childish form zigzaggin' to'rds Losh's and ever and anon wavin' her hand."

"You needn't look after the little hussy!" snapped my jealous wife. "Linda Losh is drunk, and you're a fool, Kit Bandy!"

"And I guess she told the truth in both cases. But I didn't go up to Losh's. I went home and tried to explain, but the more I tried the more I didn't, and finally yielded the floor to 'Bina, and she held it for three years with an iron hand. Finally, to escape her concentrated wrath, I fled, and sought the society o' b'ars, Ingins and outlaws."

"Then," observed Little Lasso, who believed all the old man had told him, "an ugly wife was the means of making a great detective out of Kit Bandy."

"That may be philosophy, boy," returned Kit, "but I call it blood-red martyrdom. Why, there's not an inch o' cuticle on my body but bears evidence o' my wife's fury. Right down across my Roman brow runs a Grand Canyon o' the Colorado, where a billet in 'Bina's hands fell on my head like a two-ton pile-driver. The cantilever bridge o' my classic nose went down in a furious gale o' flyin' sad-irons and pots and kettles. My right ear lops like a broken palm-leaf—deprived o' its stiffenin' by a rock flipped by the pink-nailed fingers o' 'Bina. Oh, I tell you, boy, I'm a wreck—the ruins o' Babylon, the deestruction o' Herculanum, a dismantled argosy. I'd a glorious promise once o' distinction, o' honor, o' fame, but I married, and now who am I? why am I? what am I?"

"An infernal old liar!" was the startling answer that came in a clear voice from the shadows hard by!

CHAPTER XII.

OLD FRIENDS MEET.

KIT BANDY and the young ranchero stopped short at the sound of that voice in the shadows. The old detective's hand dropped to his belt as he fixed his eyes on the spot whence the voice had come.

What made the situation more precarious at that moment was that they had entered the light of the outlaws' deserted camp-fire, and knew they were exposed to eyes concealed in the darkness.

"Hands up, Kit Bandy!" again commanded that hidden voice after a moment's silence, and at the same instant an old man in hunter's garb stepped from the bushes and confronted the two astonished men.

"Holy horn o' Joshua!" burst from Kit's lips; "it's that red pirate, Old Tom Rattler!"

"It are, Kitsie, by the great Rosycrusians!" was the hunter's rejoinder, as the two old-time friends rushed together with faces beaming with joy.

"Bless your soul, Tom, this is a Joe-hunn o' a pleasure to meet you again! Why, you're the same, measly old veteran o' forty years ago—just as ugly—just as tricky—still lurkin' in the shadows to git the drop on friend and foe. But, say, how've you been, Tom?"

"Busy as a beaver, Kit; on the go up and down creation wherever there's a chance for a fight or a pelt. The Epidemic knows no rest. But I see you're not changin' a bit, but the same wild-eyed fraud—telling that same old toothless, antiquated lie 'bout your wife, and wailin' forth that same ole pre-historic lamentations. Kitsie, can't you git up somethin' new!—somethin' that 'll sound like the truth? Tell 'em Old Tom Rattler's the best Injin-fighter you ever met, and a man who will not 'sociate with strangers to the truth. Kitsie, what're you doin' down here in this land o' drouth, cacti, Ingins, pirates and other things too numerous to mention?"

"Been tryin' to git away from some former 'sociates I used to know," replied Kit; "but I do b'lieve if I'd go into the black heart o' Africa, huntin' for a lost explorer, you'd turn up there too, with a Ujiji maiden or two on your arm, or a Jimjambi sculp at your belt. But, Thomas Rat, it'd done your soul good to 'a' see'd me yank this young man outen the jaws o' death right under this tree not over an hour ago."

"I saw the hull performance, Kitsie," Tom replied with a smile, "and it war a very clever bit o' work for an old buccaneer like you. Yes, I see'd you swing down from that tree on that very rope hanging there yit, but I did not see your face so didn't know it war you. Hangin' to that rope you looked like two great snakes tied together at the tails with the heads hangin' down the way you warped and writhed them old, long legs in the air. But how did it come you war up in that tree, Kitsie?"

"When I travel in the mountains now, Tommy, I alers carry a light, strong hammock and go to roost in a tree. I won't trust my precious self to the snakes and panthers that infest this land by day and by night. I war in my nest when them fellers come here with Little Lasso."

"Hal ha!" laughed Tom, "I reckon you looked like an oriole or a bird o' paradise, or a gold-plumed tallyhooper up there, in your own estimation; but, if I'd see'd you thar, I'd shot you for a kangaroo or a jackass-bird, or somethin'. But that was a lilly-lipped hummer you played on them outlaws! It saved me killin' the hull b'ilin' o' them, for I war just girdin' up to sail into them, when down came the outlaw from the tree, down glided Oriole Bandy, and all was over. The robbers rubbed their eyes, collected their senses, brought up their hosses, tied the dead climber in his saddle, mounted, and dashed off at a breakneck speed, as though they'd suddenly suspected Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic, war in the country. Say, which way be you fellers headed?"

"I am on my way to the cabin of Bob Bayard, the hunter," answered Little Lasso.

"Where from?"

"Redwood Camp."

"Wal, I'm on my way to Redwood from Tom Bayard's cabin," said Rattler.

"That's queer," said the boy; "Judge Hurry sent me over to Bayard's after his nephew, Ralph King."

"And I'm on my way to Redwood for Ralph King," Old Tom declared. "He left Bob's three days ago for Redwood Basin."

"Then," responded the boy, "somethin's befallen him, for he has never reached there."

"Great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler; "mebby he fell into the hands o' the gang o' cut-throats that war goin' to hang you, boy. It are horrible, if he are killed, for he's a young and lovely wife awaitin' him at Bayard's cabin this holy minute."

"Ar'n't you mistaken, Tom Rattler?" questioned the boy, "bout his wife bein' there?"

"Wal, the young lady said she was Ralph's wife, and I believe she's no Old Kit Bandy in disregardin' of the truth," replied the hunter, with emphasis.

"Then Ralph King has two wives," declared Lasso, for there arrived in Redwood to-day a handsome lady with a baby saying she was Ralph's wife. She was accompanied by her brother, a genteel-looking man. As Ralph hadn't returned yet, Mr. Hurry sent me after him. On the way I fell into them robbers' hands, and they tried to make me tell where I was going and what for. As it wasn't any of their business, I wouldn't tell, for I was afraid they meant to harm Ralph, and intended to kill me whether I told or not."

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit; "two wives and no husband! Boys, there's somethin' rotten in Denmark. Ralph King is either the victim of a foul conspiracy, or else he is a notorious scoundrel—perhaps Black Vulcan hisself!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INDIAN GIRL'S TREACHERY.

BOB BAYARD never went out of sight of his cabin after the departure of Tom Rattler for Redwood Basin. The safety of May, the self-proclaimed wife of his friend, Ralph King, and pretty Eva Hunter, devolved upon him alone; hence his extreme caution.

And what made the situation more complicated was not only the fear of enemies outside, but possible treachery on the part of the demure little Indian maid, Vine, whom he had to leave with Eva and May whenever he went out. Bob had learned never to trust an Indian, male or female, and when Vine came meekly into his cabin and returned the jewelry she had robbed Eva and May of, his suspicions were aroused. He could not drive her away, for she acted with such apparent sincerity, and accepted the hospitality of his cabin with such manifest satisfaction that he thought he might be wronging her.

The young hunter had no fears of an enemy approaching from the rear of his cabin, for the line of perpendicular bluffs curving half-around the little park formed a fine protection. If danger came, it would be from the east through the woods.

The women were not confined wholly to the gloomy walls of the hunter's home. May having recovered so far as to be able to walk out, she and Eva strolled about the cabin at pleasure. The girl, Vine, always went with them, silent and uncommunicative—seeming to act as if her own safety now depended on keeping in the presence of the white women.

Bob returned to the cabin every hour or two

to see how matters were there. Eva prepared dinner, and after he had partaken thereof the young hunter returned to his watch in the woods.

The day wore on, and another night finally settled over the Black Mountains.

Bob ate his supper, and, taking leave of his *protégées*, went out for a night of lonely watching.

And a dreary, darksome night it was. About ten o'clock the women put out their light and went to rest.

May slept on a bunk, and Eva and Vine laid down together on a pallet of furs and blankets.

Having become somewhat accustomed to their situation, May and Eva soon sunk into peaceful slumber. They had slept for some time when Eva awoke to find herself lying alone. Vine, the Indian maiden, was gone.

Starting up, she called the girl's name aloud and awakened May. There was no response to her call, save a little cry of alarm from May's lips.

A glare of red light shone in through the little window in rear of the cabin. There was the odor of burning pine in the room.

Eva arose, and, hastening to the window, looked out. A cry of horror burst from her lips. A fire had been kindled outside against the cabin, and the building was in flames. In the bushes a rod or two away she saw Vine standing, her hitherto immobile face now aglow with the eager expression of a young demoness. That she had fired the cabin there was no doubt in Eva's mind.

Hastily Eva and May dressed themselves, and then Eva opened the door and was about to call to Bob, when the sound of heavy footfalls greeted her ears. Before she could utter a word, Bob Bayard came running up and bounded into the room carrying her with him. He quickly closed and barred the door, and then, turning to the women, said:

"Girls, danger has come!"

The women did not have to inquire in what form, for a hideous, savage yell at this instant arose outside the cabin. It seemed to come from two-score throats and sent a chill of terror to the hearts of the sisters.

"Oh, my God!" cried May, wringing her hands in fear; "and the treacherous Vine has set fire to the cabin, Bob!"

Notwithstanding Bob had seen the light, he had no thought of the cabin being on fire until this moment.

He ran to the window and looked out. He saw the fire was crawling up the dry pine wall. It had already reached the projecting eaves of the roof and the dry clap-boards were burning fiercely. He, too, saw the gleeful face of the treacherous little savage, Vine, and drew his revolver, but quickly returned it to his belt saying, half-aloud:

"No, I will not; she's a woman."

Trembling with fear May and Eva stood back in the corner of the cabin, their eyes following the movements of their big friend, whom they could plainly see in the light that glared in through the window.

Suddenly there came a rattling crash of tomahawks upon the door, followed by another unearthly scream of savage demons.

A cry of fear burst from the women's lips.

The brave young hunter spoke words of encouragement to them, but they were uttered in the very face of a hopeless situation.

His words were immediately followed by the loud hoarse voice of a white man outside calling out:

"Ho! in there, Bob Bayard! Do you want to roast yourself and them weemin alive?"

Bob made no answer. He knew not what reply to give. He knew the party were enemies and were there for murder and plunder. So far as he was individually concerned he would rather have died there than surrender to the foe. But it was the fate of the women that concerned him. To him they looked for protection. He feared the fire more than the savages just then. It would be only a short time until the flames would drive them out to either die or surrender. Which should it be? He turned to the terror-stricken women.

"Ladies," he said, "I could defy the savages and die fighting them. But the flames I fear. This cabin will soon be in ashes and the patience of that little traitress, Vine, will be rewarded. I care not for my own self, but I would like to save you."

"Bob," said Eva, "would there not be some hope for us if we surrendered?"

"For you—yes; but for me—"

His words were here drowned by another

frightful crash upon the door that shook the whole cabin and a wild, impatient yell.

When the noise had subsided the hunter continued his conversation with the women, and finally suggested a plan by which he hoped all might escape. May and Eva readily acquiesced in it, and made arrangements for leaving the cabin.

Bob filled his cartridge-belt, saw that every chamber of his revolvers was loaded, slung his rifle at his back and then he was ready for the worst.

Meanwhile the loud-mouthed renegade outside had kept up his efforts to open communications with those inside, and having completed his arrangements Bob then called out:

"Who are you, howlin' out there?"

"I am White Bear, the Yuma chief," was the immediate response, "and many of my braves are with me."

Of this man White Bear, Bob had often heard. He was a white man with all the cruel instincts of a savage. He was chief of a band of outlaw Indians of various tribes, whose home was in the fastness of the hills beyond the Colorado River.

"Well, what do you want?" Bob demanded.

"Want you and them gals stoppin' with you to come out before you're roasted," was the answer.

"Suppose we do," returned Bob, "what assurance have we that your minions will not butcher us alive?"

"Them ladies 'll not be harmed, but as for yourself I won't answer because o' the killin' of the three warriors by that old hunter. The friends o' them Ingins are here, and they're mighty restless. If you're too big a coward to come out, let the females come, and you can stay and roast if ye prefer that manner o' dyin'."

By this time the flames had crept up and enveloped nearly the whole roof, casting a lurid light on all sides of the cabin. Through a crack in the wall Bob could see over a score of persons, most of whom were hideously-painted savages, and the position they occupied in front of the building.

Already sparks and live coals from the roof were dropping down inside the room, and seeing that the roof must soon fall, Bob realized that no time was to be lost, and so responded thus to White Bear:

"Well, we'll all come out; but I hope you'll see that I am given a chance to explain 'bout the killin' of the three Ingins."

"Oh, I'll do that!" was the chief's response, and a low, derisive laugh was heard to follow.

Without further delay Bob unbarred the door, threw it wide open, and then, side by side, May and Eva passed out into the yard, closely followed by Bob.

"Ugh!" ejaculated a red-skin who was standing some fifteen feet from the door, as the trio crossed the threshold, "big pale-face hunter coward—walk close behind white squaws so no git hurt—he heap 'fraid!"

The painted wretch had scarcely uttered these words when May and Eva stepped apart, and instantly Bob's arms, which had hitherto been concealed by the women's forms, were extended before him. In each hand he held a cocked revolver, from the muzzles of which flashed two tongues of flame, and the facetious savage and a comrade at his side fell dead. Then with a bound like that of a lion the young hunter sprang forward, still firing as he advanced, and rushing like a madman through the opening thus made in the line of savages, he dashed away toward the woods!

CHAPTER XIV.

BOB'S STRUGGLE WITH A TIGRESS.

So unexpected was the bold dash of Bob Bayard for liberty that the red-skins were taken wholly off their guard. He had yielded, apparently, to the chief's demands with so little argument and without firing a shot, that they had been led to believe the big hunter overwhelmed with fear, and not a warrior was prepared to strike a blow until he was beyond reach of knife and tomahawk.

But they were not slow in starting in pursuit. With a yell of vengeance two-thirds of the band rushed off after him.

A few strides, however, carried Bob into the shadows of the pines, where he felt the chances of escape were in his favor. But he had taken but few steps there when some living thing sprang from the shadows and seized hold of his arm with a grip he could not break loose.

He first thought it was a panther, and he would have sent a bullet through it had a piercing scream not broke from its lips, telling him

it was that little human tigress, Vine, the Indian girl.

Although the treacherous girl may have deserved killing, such a thought never entered Bob's mind, and he ran on, dragging her along and endeavoring to break her hold.

But in this he failed, for, after uttering her piercing scream, she fastened her teeth upon his arm and clung on with all the tenacity of a wild-cat.

Thus for three or four rods Bob continued on, but his flight was greatly impeded by his burden, and the noise made by him served to direct his pursuers, who he soon discovered were rapidly gaining on him. So he stopped short and endeavored to fling her off, and, although he swung her clear of the ground, she clung on with tooth and nail.

This Bob saw would not do, and by sheer force he broke the grasp of one of her hands, at the same time giving her arm a wrench that caused her to release her tooth-hold to give utterance to a cry of pain. As she did this, Bob flung her away from him squarely against a savage that had by this time got within six feet of them—coming on a run.

The result of the collision caused the frantic Vine to recoil and fall, and before she could rise the warrior stumbled and fell over her. Another red-skin coming up ran into his friend, and in a moment or two half a dozen warriors were mixed up in the dark in a frantic scramble, and from the midst of the tangled mob came ear-splitting shrieks from the lips of the little tigress, Vine.

Before the savages could ascertain the true condition of affairs Bob Bayard had made good his escape.

CHAPTER XV.

MAY AND EVA AGAIN CAPTIVES.

AS soon as the excitement consequent upon Bob Bayard's bold dash, which had been planned before he left the cabin, had subsided, White Bear, the renegade chief, approached May and Eva, who were inwardly rejoicing over Bob's escape, and said, in a vexed tone:

"I reckon that trick war planned afore you folks come out, but it won't do Bob Bayard, or you either, any good. He'll pay dearly for them lives he took, mind what I tell ye, gals. But come along with me. It's gittin' a little too hot here."

The renegade was a low, heavy-set man of fifty, with an evil, sinister eye, and a rough, bearded face that was the personification of wolfish cunning and brutality.

The captives followed him from the door of the burning cabin to the edge of the woods, and there the return of those who had gone in pursuit of Bob was awaited. High hopes of the fearless hunter's capture were entertained; but at length the pursuers began to straggle in by ones and twos, a disappointed and dejected crowd.

And finally the plucky little Vine herself appeared upon the scene, her face scratched and bleeding and her eyes snapping with anger and rage. When she came up to where the sisters stood, she laughed in their faces, and at once proceeded to deprive them of their jewelry for the second time, White Bear looking on with an air of approval.

From Vine the Indians had already learned that Tom Rattler had gone to Redwood for friends, and as there was no telling when he might return, it was decided best not to remain in that vicinity, and so immediate departure was agreed upon.

White Bear was a very great and cunning villain. A life of outlawry had kept him so constantly on the alert that the faculty of caution had been so fully developed that he had never failed to outwit his enemies. This fact had made him chief, and his followers believed him invincible, and so, when he gave orders to prepare for departure from the vicinity of Bob Bayard's cabin, no one demurred, late as it was.

The renegade gave his orders in clear, plain English. The captives heard every word with a feeling of hopeless despair, for the scheme the villain planned to entrap Bob Bayard, should he attempt to follow them, was almost certain to be the death of the brave hunter.

Once across the Colorado River, in the Nevada hills, and they could defy all southern Arizona. Their retreat must be made by the same route they had come, the Black Canyon, and so White Bear and five men, with May and Eva, took their departure, accompanied also by the maiden, Vine. The rest of the band, under Yuma Joe, fifteen in number, followed close behind, but when they reached the entrance

to the canyon, they halted for upward of an hour.

This was done to give White Bear a good start with the prisoners, and guard against any attempt at releasing the girls by a sudden dash from the rear, for they had no fears whatever of danger before them.

It was a hard and painful journey to the poor captives through that dismal canyon that grew deeper and darker as they neared the river. Not a moment's rest was given them, and with a man on each side they were half carried along at a lively gait.

The captives took no heed of the passage of time until they saw it growing light overhead. A new day was dawning, and while it would dispel the shadows of night from the land, it would not drive the gloom of despair from their breasts.

At length, just as they reached the Colorado River, the sun peeped up over the mountains and flooded with light the hills beyond the river. But to the captives it verily seemed to reveal new shadows—shadows into which their own lives must pass forever, leaving all hope behind. As they emerged from the canyon and crossed a flat, stony beach to the water's edge, White Bear said, to two of the white men in his party:

"Now, Jule, you and Dagger bring the boat up and we'll soon be over in the promised land."

The renegades addressed went down-stream a short distance, and from under a projecting ledge, screened by willows, drew out a canoe, which they boarded, and paddled to where White Bear and party were waiting.

As the dug-out would not carry all the party, White Bear, the three women and "Dagger" were to cross first, and they at once entered the craft and pushed off.

"Dagger" handled the paddle with great skill, and, despite the swift current, the boat soon touched upon the opposite shore. The chief assisted the women to land, and then Dagger started back for his companions.

On the west of the river the hills began within a few rods of the water's edge, and were deep and densely wooded. Under cover of the nearest cluster of pines, White Bear conducted his captives and Vine to await the crossing of his friends, and obtain a much-needed rest.

May and Eva sat down, and with their arms about each other, sobbed in anguish of heart.

White Bear produced an old pipe, loaded and lighted it and began smoking, a complaisant smile playing over his ruffianly face as he regarded his captives with a gleam of admiration in his evil eyes.

Suddenly a cry of alarm burst from the lips of the girl, Vine. White Bear started to his feet and turned about, to find himself confronted by the stalwart form of a man in hunter's garb, and gazing into the muzzle of a cocked revolver.

The man was Bob Bayard, the Young Mountaineer!

CHAPTER XVI.

BLACK VULCAN'S DISGUISE PRODUCED.

JUDGE PROSPER HURRY had been nearly prostrated mentally and physically by the events of the past few days, but the visit of Sabina Bandy capped the climax and almost drove him mad.

Just what she meant by Aimee King being a beautiful serpent was a mystery to him he would have given half his wealth to solve. But Sabina was gone—had vanished as silently as though dissolved into the darkness around him. He called to her but no answer came back.

For an hour the old man stood alone in the night pondering the matter over in his mind, but the more he did so the more confused he became, and finally he went in to talk with Aimee, but found she had retired.

In his confusion the judge entirely forgot the paper Sabina had given him, and undressing he went to bed. He slept, but it was a sleep filled with troublous dreams, and he arose in the morning his nervous system unstrung.

Aimee endeavored to cheer him up, but he was like a man suffering the horrors of a drunken carouse, for her words and smiles only produced before his distracted mental vision the delusive presence of beautiful serpents, which-ever way he turned.

As soon as he had drank a cup of coffee, he lit his pipe and went out for a walk. Under the redwoods of his cabin he paced to and fro. The air in the house was becoming stifling, and the old man began to think that his old heart- troubles were at work again and that the end was near. In the very nature of things he knew he could not last long at best, for he was getting old, and when he had induced Ralph King to settle down and take charge of his business in-

terests, he felt that he would be permitted to round out his last years in quiet and peace of mind. But the very opposite seemed to have been produced in one short month. Ralph was now gone, and a messenger failed to bring him home, and in fact the messenger himself had not returned.

Then again, Captain Darrow was missing, and the general belief existed that he had been waylaid and murdered by Desert Pirates on his return to Sand Creek; and then the visit of Sabina Bandy and her mysterious words and conduct! and—ah! the paper she had given him! For the first time since he had received it he thought of it as he paced to and fro under the trees, and he began fumbling in his pockets for it.

But before he had found it his attention was attracted by a horseman coming up the street toward him. At a glance he recognized the horse as the one ridden away by Ralph King, but it was not Ralph riding him back. It was Mohave Jim who drew rein before him, saying: "Good mornin', judge; I've some ugly news for you."

"I am prepared for anything," replied Hurry, "and expected as much when I recognized that horse."

Mohave threw a bundle to the ground wrapped in a blanket, and then dismounted.

"What has happened?" the old man went on, in eager impatience. "Is Ralph dead?"

"Ralph is not dead, but—"

"Thank God!" interrupted the ranchman.

"But," Mohave continued, "you may be sorry he is not."

"Why?"

"In huntin' for your missin' pardner, Cap Darrow, we traced this hoss into one of the wildest recesses of the Black Mountains, and there came upon your nephew, the Nabob Vagabond, and a companion who was none other than the miner, 'Mother' Ike. Ralph was wounded, and when we commanded their surrender they fired on us, killin' 'Elkskin' Jake, and then they darted into the thick bushes and escaped, leaving the horse and some other things behind 'em."

Prosper Hurry grasped his brow and staggered back to the support of a tree, against which he leaned.

Mohave untied the bundle he had thrown on the ground, and took therefrom a slouched, black hat, a mask of long black whiskers, and a long coat, the right sleeve of which was stiff with coagulated blood. Holding them up before the judge, he asked:

"Judge, did you ever see them things before?"

Hurry gazed at the things for a moment, his face growing visibly whiter. Finally he said:

"Yes, they are the disguise worn by Black Vulcan the night he attempted to rob me."

"And what would you think if I should tell you we found 'em with this hoss—in other words we found 'em where we found Ralph King and Mother Ike?"

"Have you proof of this, Jim?"

"I have; besides Elskin Jake, who war shot, Nat Kahler war with me."

"I must have additional proof," declared the judge, "of Ralph's being the robber, Black Vulcan. I have waited patiently the return of Little Lasso who is long past due to return. I cannot believe Ralph guilty without the most positive proof. I could not believe him guilty unless he should appear before me bearing unimpeachable evidence of the effect of Kid Bandy's shot in the arm. That is undoubtedly the disguise worn by the man who came to rob me, but the fact of your finding them where you say you found Ralph and the miner, is not conclusive to one whose ties of blood seek every pretext for hope in the innocence of his only relative on earth."

"The proof will be forthcomin', judge," declared Mohave with affected regret; "men are after him and Ike and they cannot escape capture dead or alive. I regret it very much on your account, judge, but duty and self-protection compels us to crush out that gang o' Desert Pirates, let the blow fall where it may. And be Ralph King guilty or innocent, it'll be all the better for you and his innocent wife to know the truth."

"Very true, Jim, very true," affirmed the judge sadly.

"And I am come to answer for myself!"

It was a voice in the shadows that spoke these words, and turning Hurry and Mohave Jim saw a man with a shawl around his shoulders, step into full view and stand before them.

Both men were thunderstruck.

The man before them was Ralph King, the

Nabob Vagabond, his face pale and pinched with evident suffering of physical pain! His right arm was supported in a sling!

CHAPTER XVII.

LIVELY TIMES ON THE COLORADO.

MAY and Eva discovered the presence of the big hunter, Bob Bayard, at the same moment that White Bear's eyes met those of the young mountaineer, and springing to her feet Eva exclaimed:

"It's Bob Bayard!"

The renegade chief started back, his pipe falling from his mouth and his hand dropping to his revolver, but this latter movement Bob had anticipated and before the villain could draw and fire, he sent a bullet crashing through his brain. Without even a groan the renegade sunk to the earth, and then turning to the women Bob said:

"Good-morning, gals."

"Oh!" cried Eva, grasping the big hunter by the hand, "can this be reality?"

"It's a solemn fact, Miss Eva," responded Bob, "but I wish I'd strangled that young she wild-cat!"

His last words referred to Vine who, recovering from her momentary surprise, had turned and darted away and was now running toward the river screaming like one possessed of the devil, as Vine undoubtedly was.

Bob started to follow her but stopped on seeing the girl rush down to the river and, as if wholly bereft of reason, plunge into the stream. He saw her sink from view under the water, but soon appear on the surface again and strike out for the opposite shore swimming like a beaver.

The current, however, being strong, it bore her rapidly down-stream, but still she bravely battled on and was quite half-across the river, when she ceased her efforts, uttered a frantic cry for help, and sunk under the waves.

All this time her friends had stood motionless, the report of Bob's pistol having apparently paralyzed them; and not until Vine's cry for help reached their ears did they bestir themselves. Then two of them leaped into the canoe and pulled to her assistance.

"That," said Bob Bayard, as he watched the boat from their covert, "would be a good chance to pick them scoundrels off, but it shall never be said of Bob Bayard that he killed even an Ingin that was tryin' to save a woman."

"Bob," exclaimed Eva, in a voice full of emotion, "you are a brave, generous, noble man! How fortunate have we been, in our misfortunes, to have met you—to have you for a friend and protector!"

"Thank you," Bob replied, with a confused smile; "I hope that you'll always—that we'll always be good friends."

"We will, I know we will!" declared Eva, a little embarrassed herself; "but that you are here is what seems such a pleasant mystery to us."

"It's plain enough when you know the facts," Bob said. "After I got away from them varmints last night, I crawled back so close I could hear White Bear talkin', and when I heard his arrangements for retreat and the way he was goin', I jumped in ahead of you and kept ahead till I got here. I rafted myself across the river on some driftwood, and here awaited your coming. I didn't have any definite plan of action, for I did not know what the situation would be. I did not know as I could help you at all, but I resolved to watch for an opportunity and make a desperate effort. But it now seems that the good Lord has helped us, for I couldn't have asked for anything better; but we are not safe yet, and must get away from here. I have no fear for half a dozen Ingins when under cover, but there are more than a dozen others coming a short—Ah! hark!"

This last exclamation was caused by the report of fire-arms rolling and crashing down Black Canyon with startling distinctness. The face of the young mountaineer assumed an eager, anxious expression.

"What does it mean, Bob?" May inquired. "There's fightin' goin' on up the canyon," he replied. "It may be Tom Rattler and friends, who have been follerin' the Indians. I hope so, at least. We will soon know, for it sounds like a runnin' fight. We will wait here a few minutes."

Meanwhile the two Indians in the canoe had hurried away to the assistance of the drowning Vine, but before they could reach her she went down under the waves to rise no more. They cruised about in hopes of seeing her rise again, but the sudden sound of battle up the canyon

breaking upon their ears, poor Vine was forgotten, and they hastily paddled back to their three friends and landed.

They had not seen the White Bear nor the captives since he had conducted them into the woods, but they were fully satisfied by the report of a pistol they had heard and the frantic conduct of Vine that something had gone wrong on the other side of the river.

The five held a hurried consultation. The fear that all was not right with the chief, the tragic death of Vine, and the sound of battle up the canyon, filled their minds with doubt and uncertainty. And before they could decide upon a course of action, eight or ten of Yuma Joe's rear guard came rushing from the pass like panic-stricken sheep.

"Make haste and git across the river!" yelled one of them—a renegade, whose voice Bob Bayard distinctly heard, "the miners, fifty strong, under Tom Rattler, are coming down the canyon! They've already killed half o' our men, and Yuma into the bargain!"

These startling words threw the other five into a panic, and the whole party made a wild rush for the boat. As it would not safely carry to exceed six, it was swamped in a minute by thirteen endeavoring to board it.

Then began a fight among themselves for the craft. It was quickly raised and emptied of water, but as quickly swamped again.

Again it was raised when the renegade Dagger leaped into the boat, and with a revolver in each hand cried out:

"Keep out or I'll blow your heads off! listen, men! this boat 'll not carry but five! Some 'll have to remain outside in the water and hold on to the sides o' the craft! Do you hear me?"

All heard him, but each one wanted to be one of the five to enter the boat, and another rush was made when the desperate renegade made good his threat and shot two of his comrades dead. This caused the others to recoil, and for a moment it seemed Dagger would have his way, but the smoke from his pistols had scarcely lifted from over the boat ere he himself plunged forward and fell dead, shot down by a bullet from the opposite shore.

This increased the fears of the panic-stricken gang, for they saw, standing on the opposite bank, rifle in hand, Bob Bayard, preparing for a second shot. And then upon the heels of this discovery came a triumphant yell from the canyon, and deserting the boat, the savages and their white allies took to their heels. They ran along the beach down the river. Precipitous bluffs soon forced them to take to the water, and plunging in they struck out like so many frightened muskrats. They swam with the current, which rapidly carried them down the stream, and beyond rifle-range; and whether all escaped or not is not material to our story now.

The "fifty miners" under Tom Rattler, that the excited renegade had declared were coming, did not materialize. Tom, however, did, and he was accompanied by Old Kit Bandy and Little Lasso, the boy ranchero. It was the deadly rifles and revolvers of these three that had done such fearful work in the ranks of White Bear's rear guard, as to magnify nearly twenty fold their actual number in the eyes of the surprised Indians.

Bob Bayard shouted to them at the top of his great lungs, and the sisters coming down to the river, answered the trio's shouts of joy with waves of the hand.

"Whar's the red-skins, Robert?" called out Old Tom, seeing all the foe had vanished.

"Some are dead, and the rest 've struck out for the Gulf o' California," responded Bob; "the coast is clear, so bring over that canoe, Thomas, and carry us back to old Arizona!"

Old Tom laid aside his rifle, leaped into the canoe and paddled across the river, where he received a warm reception from Bob and the women. May inquired at once about her husband, but Old Tom, evading the truth of what he had heard from the lips of Little Lasso concerning Ralph King, told her he did not go all the way to Redwood, but, meeting Bandy and Little Lasso, had returned to escort them—the women—to Redwood, deeming the four men, with the ranchero's horse for May to ride, sufficient force to protect them on the journey.

May was sorely disappointed, but did not let her words or looks betray her feelings to the brave old hunter.

The four speedily recrossed the river and joined Kit Bandy and Little Lasso, to whom Old Tom introduced Bob Bayard and the women.

Then Tom explained how they came to be there: on reaching Bob's cabin and finding it in ashes, they knew the Indians had been there,

and that the girls had been carried off. As to Bob, they could form no idea of what had become of him. They knew by the fire that the destroyers could not have been gone long, and so they set off on their trail, which they found leading down Black Canyon. About daylight they came in sight of the rear guard of the marauders and opened fire upon them, and a running fight ensued, the pursuers all the time keeping well under cover of trees, rocks and shadows. In this way they finally reached the river, having impressed the foe, by their skillful marksmanship, that they were "fifty strong, led by Tom Rattler."

Kit Bandy took Bob Bayard aside, and told him of Ralph King's continued absence from Redwood, of the suspicions resting upon the young man, and of there being a woman in Redwood claiming to be Ralph's wife also. It was agreed that none of these things should be spoken of to May, for she was already suffering in mind and body; besides, the facts would be made known to her soon enough when the camp was reached.

The return up the canyon at once began, and about noon they reached the ruins of Bob Bayard's cabin, near where Little Lasso had left his horse.

Bob found the cache in which he kept his food supplies undisturbed, and a hearty dinner was served there in the woods.

Old Kit and Tom kept up a lively run of yarns on each other during their stop, and their whimsical humor had much to do in dispelling the fear and gloom from the minds of the sisters.

Finally Little Lasso brought up his horse, and May and Eva were mounted upon his back, and the journey toward Redwood Basin was resumed, the young ranchero walking at the horse's head.

Old Tom went on in advance to see that the way was clear of danger, while Kit Bandy and Bob Bayard brought up the rear.

In this way they proceeded on until dusk, when a halt was made for the night, for, as all were somewhat fatigued, and the distance to Redwood could easily be made the next day, night travel was not deemed necessary, since to continue on might lead them into dangers from the outlaws that Kit had robbed of a victim at Broken Tree.

Supper was served from the remnants of their dinner, and then, after an hour's conversation, a couple of blankets were given May and Eva, and they laid down upon a couch of pine needles and leaves that Bob had prepared for them, and hopeful that the morrow would end their suffering and exposure to perils, they fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NABOB AT BAY.

"RALPH KING!—my boy!" burst from the lips of Prosper Hurry, as the Nabob confronted him and Mohave Jim, "do my eyes deceive me? Can this be true?"

"The proof is before you, judge!" cried Mohave Jim, pointing to Ralph's right arm which hung in a sling, at the same time betraying no little surprise and excitement.

"Yes, uncle," added Ralph, in a clear, calm voice, "I am proof in the flesh and blood that I still live and have an existence in this wild and wicked old world."

"Ralph, why is that arm in a sling?" the old man demanded, pointing to the wounded limb.

"I was most painfully hurt by a bullet, uncle," was the answer, "but I prefer to talk with you alone about it for personal reasons."

"Then I will withdraw," said Mohave, in a tone full of sarcasm; "here is your horse, Black Vulcan, I return to you."

"Thank you," said Ralph, unmoved by the man's words.

"Ralph King! did you hear him call you Black Vulcan?" the judge asked, as Mohave turned and moved away.

"I did, but I want no words with that man now. I have heard—no difference how—that Black Vulcan attempted to rob you since I left, and that Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, shot him in the right arm, as I was shot. I have also heard that I'd been suspected by many of being Black Vulcan. But give me time, uncle; I know this arm is strong against me, but keep the hell-hounds off me until the time comes, and I'll show you one of the most fiendish conspiracies to rob and ruin ever concocted outside the purlieus of hell itself. And, furthermore, I am informed that there is a handsome woman here claiming to be my wife."

"Your wife, Ralph, is here in my house," an-

swered the old ranchman, "and she is a very charming lady, and has a very pretty boy baby."

A smile flitted across the face of the Nabob as he commanded:

"Uncle, conduct me into her presence. I am anxious to see my wife, for I was not expecting her here."

The judge led the way into the cabin. Aimee sat with her child on her lap in the room, and when they entered she arose, and glancing at the judge and Ralph, said nothing.

"Aimee," said Hurry, somewhat surprised that she did not recognize Ralph, "don't you recognize this man?"

Again Aimee glanced at Ralph and colored deeply.

"I believe I have never met him before," was her startling reply.

"Why, woman!" exclaimed the astonished judge, "you told me you were Ralph King's wife. That is Ralph King himself!"

Aimee started as if suddenly aroused from a troubled sleep. The color receded from her face, and an expression of anguish settled around her eyes and mouth. For a minute she stood motionless, speechless, then she exclaimed:

"Then I have been deceived! That man is not my husband! Oh, my God! what does this mean?"

"It means, madam"—Ralph King began, but he was interrupted by the sound of excited voices approaching the cabin.

He advanced to the door and looked out. He saw Ben Hall, the marshal, and Mohave Jim at the head of a dozen or more armed miners coming toward the cabin.

At sight of Ralph a derisive yell mingled with curses of vengeance, burst from the lips of the excited, frenzied mob.

"Come out, Ralph King, outlaw and murderer! Your time has come!" yelled Mohave Jim, flourishing a rope above his head.

With his left hand Ralph King drew his revolver, and stepping back a pace or two from the door, his face turning a deathly pallor, and his eyes flashing with a fierce light, he shouted:

"Men of Redwood, keep off! I am not a wolf to be hunted longer! The first man that crosses that threshold shall die!"

CHAPTER XIX.

KIT BANDY'S BIG FIND.

To Kit Bandy and his little party the night passed quietly in the canyon, and an hour before daybreak they were on the move, all feeling greatly refreshed and invigorated by their rest.

Old Kit took the lead, moving some twenty rods or more in advance of his party. They had gone about a mile when the canyon walls on the right fell away into a heavily timbered valley, whose limits were defined by grim and rugged bluffs more than a mile distant.

While traversing this little wooded valley, or park, Old Kit's ear caught the sound of hooved feet somewhere in the dense wood, and turning, he hurried back to his friends to put them on their guard, not knowing whether there was danger or not in the vicinity.

But as no horseman came their way, Bandy made up his mind that, whoever it was, had gone westward through the timber, and, turning to Old Tom, he said:

"Thomas, before we proceed further, that horseman's movements ought to be investigated, eh?"

"Wal, Kitsie," replied Tom, "you've alers got your nose into other folks' business by profession. I s'pose you wouldn't be happy if ye didn't inquire into the whys and wharfores o' that hossman's presence in this park. But we'll wait for you here only on condition that you promise to tell the truth, the hull truth, and nothin' but the truth, when you git back here."

"Tom Rattler," retorted Kit, "such advice illy comes o' a man that war born a falsehood and who never tussled with the truth in his 'ole life."

As he thus spoke, Bandy departed, and Little Lasso said to Tom:

"The old fellow was a little huffy, wasn't he?"

"Not a bit o' it, Lasso," responded Tom; "that's Old Kit's style. We say whatever we think to each other; but Kitsie can beat me on a fantastical, 'way-up lie. That story 'bout his wife, Sabina, is an all-wool Ananias. He tells it to every stranger he meets when he wants to kill time, or divert attention from somethin' he don't want to talk about. Kitsie's a lily-lipped hummer—as brave a man as ever swatted a red-rind or ever undermined an outlaw."

Kit moved away through the timber toward the west, and was approaching the environing

bluffs, when he was suddenly brought to a stand by a startling discovery.

Upon a table-rock, some fifty or sixty feet above the level of the valley, he saw five men standing. They were all dressed in cowboy suits, and well armed. Back of them the bluffs rose perpendicular to a great height, and from out a hiding-place, invisible to Kit, the men had appeared.

From the edge of the level upon which they stood the rock sloped down to the valley at an angle of about sixty degrees, making it too steep for a man to descend unaided. Horses saddled and bridled awaited riders at the foot of the bluff, and Kit saw that those riders were on the rock ready to depart. But how were they to descend from the rock? There were no visible means of ascent or descent.

Presently a woman appeared from somewhere and joined the men. She was a dark-complexioned, middle-aged woman, with a face not at all prepossessing—much like that of an old Gypsy.

She talked with the men a few minutes in an undertone, then one of the cowboys took up a roll of something and placing it at the edge of the platform or table, sent it rolling down the steep, buttress-like inclination. As it descended it became smaller, leaving a plain track behind along the face of the rock, and that track Old Kit could distinctly see was a ladder of rope with rounds of wood!

Immediately one of the men began to descend; seating himself on the edge of the rock, he placed his booted heel against the top round of the ladder and at once began his descent. By holding on to the sides of the ladder, and leaning back against the rock, he made the trip to the valley with an ease that could only have been the result of considerable practice. The other four followed in like manner, when the woman at once pulled up the ladder and secured it out of sight from below.

The men mounted and rode away, and the woman retired out of sight.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" Kit mused, "that's the slickest hidin'-place I ever diskivered, and I'll bet Tom Rattler's scalp it's a robbers' roost! If I only knew the password, now, I'd have that 'Sibyl' drop the ladder and I'd go aloft. I've an ijee the men are all away, and it'd be a glorious time to investigate the roost. I must confer with Tom. Maybe his fertile brain can conceive some scheme to git us up there."

And so saying, he hastily retraced his steps to his friends and communicated his discovery to them.

Old Tom at once became enthusiastic for the invasion of the place, and so leaving the women in care of Bob and Little Lasso, in a place of easy defense, he and Kit struck off across the park.

Cautiously they approached the mysterious rendezvous under cover of the woods, and as they did so they saw the Sibyl, before mentioned, standing on the rock gazing down into the valley as if watching something.

Creeping to within fifty paces of the foot of the buttress they stopped and listened, and to their surprise they heard the "keeper of the castle" demand in a clear, peremptory voice:

"Who are you, and what are you doin' here?" And the answer that went up from the foot of the rock was in a shrill, clear voice:

"I am Sabina Bandy, the lonely deserted wife of that murderous old Kit Bandy!"

Old Tom Rattler, on hearing this, poked Kit in the ribs, almost knocking the breath out of him.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Bandy, "let us flee! my life, Tom, 's in peril!"

"Button your old yawp, Kitsie, and listen to the mockin' bird!" cautioned Rattler. "Harkee! to the fairy on the rock!"

"What the nation you pokin' 'round here for?" was the question they heard handed down to Old Sabina.

"Seekin' seclusion from the cruel world," responded Sabina. "My husband was burned to death in Redwood Camp a few nights ago, and I am a lonely, perishin' widder. I see'd you on that rock awhile ago as I sot near by weary and sad, and your kind womanly face told me you'd befriend me, and when your men folks rode away, I thought I'd appeal to your kindness."

"Wait there a few minutes," the Sibyl shouted down, "and I'll tell you what I'll do for you."

Then the woman disappeared and Old Kit quickly uttered a low, bird-like whistle, which was immediately responded to from the foot of the buttress. Kit at once advanced a few paces nearer the rock and was met by Sabina—the veritable little Ichabod Flea.

A few hurried words passed between the pardner-detectives, and then Sabina flounced back to the base of the rock and Kit rejoined Old Tom, a broad smile upon his face.

In the course of five or ten minutes the Sibyl came back and shouted down:

"Old woman, if you enter my home, understand you'll not git away until I say so!"

"I don't care if I stay there till I die!" was Sabina's answer.

The Sibyl lowered down the ladder, asking:

"Can you climb that?"

"I can try," responded Sabina, and soon she was climbing up the buttress, uttering hysterical cries of fear at every step.

"Don't look back! don't look back!" the Sibyl kept shouting.

Meanwhile Kit and Tom were creeping closer and closer to the foot of the ladder.

At length Sabina reached the top of the rock, apparently exhausted with the efforts of climbing, and as she arose to her feet, she threw her arms around the woman's neck and took her around on a kind of a waltz, gasping out some incoherent, hysterical words.

Kit and Tom now glided from cover of the woods and ran to the ladder, and like a pair of old monkeys went scrambling up the face of the rock, one close behind the other, and before the Sibyl was aware of their presence at all, so busy was she with the affectionate old "widder," both men stood before her with perspiring, smiling faces.

A scream that would have done credit to a tigress burst from the woman's lips, and then Sabina screamed too.

Old Tom could not repress a smile, and the Sibyl seeing this flew at him like a fury and gave him a shove that would have sent the little old borderman over the rock to his doom, had Old Kit not caught him in the nick of time.

Frantic with fear and rage, the guardian of the rock now ran away shrieking at the top of her lungs:

"Captain! Captain Vulcan! enemies are on the rock!"

CHAPTER XX.

AIMEE'S STORY.

THE defiant attitude assumed by Ralph King caused Marshal Hall and his posse to stop and retreat a few paces from the door of Judge Hurry's cabin.

The inmates of the Retreat were thrown into a panic and Old Jasper and his wife, accompanied by Aimee and her child, fled to the kitchen where they locked themselves in, trembling with terror.

The old judge was driven almost frantic. His sense of honor rebelled against resistance to law and order, and yet his sympathy was with his nephew who had declared he would prove himself innocent of all evils charged to him; and, while the marshal and his men were parleying outside, he said:

"Ralph, my boy, what are we to do? They're thirsting for your blood. They believe you are Black Vulcan."

"Do you, uncle?" asked Ralph.

"I cannot, until I'm convinced. Your going and coming for the past three years, without any apparent business, has caused me to wonder and others to suspect."

"Uncle, did not Sabina Bandy give you a paper the other night?" queried Ralph.

"Yes, yes! confound that paper! I've been so troubled and bothered that I never have thought of it when I had the chance to read it."

The judge produced the paper, adjusted his glasses, and read it over and then re-read it. Then he glanced at Ralph over his glasses, a mingled look of surprise and satisfaction on his face.

"And that's what you've been doing, eh?" he finally said.

"That, and nothing else," responded Ralph.

"And you can bring other proofs?"

"Yes, if necessary."

"But what of Aimee?"

"She's an impostor. I told you I had a wife. This woman admits herself she never saw me before. I believe she is more sinned against than sinning. She has been deceived by some scheme or other. Oh, I tell you, uncle, there has been a deep and devilish conspiracy concocted against me, and you also, perhaps, and it'll be proven out if our lives are spared. A cog has slipped somewhere, and this fraudulent wife business will help to locate the slip. If I can escape this mob, I want to have a talk with the woman."

"You shall escape that mob!" exclaimed the old ranchman, fiercely, "or I'll die by your side! But that wounded arm, Ralph—if I could only explain that."

"That will all be explained, I promise you, in good time."

"Then I will go at once and ask a stay of proceedings by the marshal."

"Do not let them see that commission, uncle," cautioned King.

The old man went out and made an earnest appeal for his nephew—a few days in which to bring sufficient proof of his innocence of wrongdoings. He promised he would be responsible for Ralph's appearance in court.

Mohave Jim and two or three others were deaf to the old man's appeals, and insisted upon an immediate trial; but Ben Hall and the majority of the miners, who were warm friends of the judge's, took a different view of the matter, and out of respect for the old man's wishes, finally decided to postpone proceedings three days. As the majority was against the fractious Mohave Jim, that worthy and his friends were forced to submit, and the posse dispersed.

Quiet being once more restored at The Retreat, Aimee came from the kitchen, and white with fear, sat down in the room with the judge and Ralph.

"It's all over with, Aimee," said the judge, smiling happily, "and nobody hurt."

"Oh, this is dreadful! terrible!" exclaimed the woman, in apparent distress; "I do not understand it!"

"Madam," said Ralph, kindly, "there does seem to be a great mistake somewhere. You came here claiming to be my wife, and yet you confess that you never saw me before. Can you explain this contradiction of facts?"

"I certainly can, Mr. King," Aimee responded. "In the first place, I was made to believe that Ralph King was my husband. It is this way: Two years ago I was married to Frank Van Wirt, in Lawrence, Kansas, after an acquaintance of a few months. Frank claimed to be a commercial traveler for a St. Louis house. He was away from home the most of the time after our marriage, but I thought nothing of this because of his business. The last time he was at home was three months before my baby was born. I have not seen him since. When he neither returned home nor wrote me I made up my mind that he had either deserted me, or had been foully dealt with. I loved Frank, and believed he was an honorable man, and was disposed to believe he had been murdered. I could not think he had deserted me."

"Time went on, and, judge of my great surprise, when one day I received a letter from Frank in which he confessed that he had not been what he represented himself to be to me. In the first place he admitted his name was not Van Wirt, but Ralph King, and that he was the nephew of Judge Hurry, the Arizona cattle-king. He admitted he had deserted me, and asked me to forgive him, and he would atone for all his deception and unkindness to me. He said he had quit the roving life he had lived, and had entered into the employ of his uncle, who had made him promise of half his wealth. He begged me to forgive him and come at once to him at Redwood, making the request for my brother to accompany me here."

"I loved Frank, and was only too glad to forgive him, and we started at once for Redwood. But I find now that I was cruelly deceived. You, of course, are not Frank Van Wirt. My brother must have been deceived, also, for he encouraged me to come, and came with me. What object any one could have in deceiving me in this heartless manner, I cannot imagine. But it is so."

"I'll send for your brother and let him know the truth of the matter also," declared the judge.

"As I am in the house of a stranger, perhaps I had better go to him," said Aimee.

"Not at all, Mrs. Aimee!" exclaimed the judge. "The Combine's no fit place for a woman, say nothing about a brat of a baby. Just you settle yourself down and make yourself at home long as you want to stay. I wouldn't been ashamed of you if you were Ralph's wife, but I'd been ashamed of Ralph if he had played you the trick your husband did. Consider yourself my guest. I'll send for your brother. We're all in trouble here to-day, and the Lord only knows how it will end."

But the judge did not have to send for Sheldahl, for a moment later that gentleman called at the cabin. He had heard of the return of Ralph King and came up to meet him, but when the Nabob was introduced to him, he evinced the same astonishment that Aimee did.

"You are not Frank Van Wirt!" he exclaimed.

"Not as anybody knows of," responded Ralph.

"Brother," said Aimee, "we have been shamefully, cruelly deceived."

"Somebody will suffer for it, too," responded Sheldahl, in a tone of deep meaning.

The gentleman remained at The Retreat only a few minutes, but upon departing told Aimee he would see her again in the evening, and make arrangements for their return home on the morrow.

With a moody brow he went straight from The Retreat to the cabin of Mohave Jim and Gila Bill.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OUTLAWS' DEN.

We left Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and Ichabod Flea on the table-rock in the mountains, at the entrance of what they were satisfied was an outlaw retreat.

The surface of the rock, which had the appearance of being level from the valley, was found to slope gradually downward to the bluff in the rear. In this bluff was a long opening extending back twenty feet into the cliff, and within that grotto-like place the three invaders beheld, in plain view, all the evidences of a freebooters' retreat.

As they hastily descended toward the entrance they saw a man, lying upon a couch, grasp a revolver, but through fright or sheer weakness he seemed unable to raise the weapon.

The woman ran shrieking to the opposite end of the great grotto and snatched up a rifle with murderous intent, but Old Rattler was close at her heels and quickly wrenched the weapon from her hands.

It was light as day in the grotto, and Bandy and his friends saw that the woman, and the man on the couch, were the only occupants of the place at that time; and, while he looked after the Sibyl and Ichabod Flea explored the place, Old Kit advanced to the side of the man on the couch, saying:

"Stranger, I'm Kit Bandy, and don't attempt to raise that gun."

The man was deathly pale. His right arm lay bandaged at his side, and at sight of this a light of recognition gleamed in Bandy's eyes, and he said:

"By the horn o' Joshua! I recognize you, my man! You are Captain Darrow!"

There was a flickering of the man's eyes, a painful twitching of the muscles of the face, and a drawing of the lips that told of mental anguish and physical suffering. It was fully a minute before he seemed able to speak, and then, in a feeble voice, said:

"Yes, I am Ruben Darrow, and am suffering the torments of the damned!"

"Consequently," Old Kit pointedly added, "you are Black Vulcan and are suffering from effects of a broken arm received last Wednesday night at the cabin o' Judge Hurry, in Redwood. Captain, this is a bad shape to be found in, but it's no more than I mistrusted of you. Your minions have been trying to fix your sins on Ralph King, but it won't scour. You'd as well confess that you have been the instigator of a mean conspiracy against Ralph, as well as a great robber-chief, while serving as the trusted foreman of your old friend, Hurry. But I have no desire to twit you 'bout these things further. You are down and your looks tell me you are in great misery. If I can be of service to you—"

"You can do nothing," interrupted Darrow, for he the man truly was; "inflammation in my arm has been followed by mortification for want of proper attendance, and there's no hope for me. Your bullet shivered the bone to splinters, and amputation alone could have saved my life. I have but one confession to make, and that is that I am Black Vulcan!"

And scarcely had the last word fallen from his lips ere he grasped the revolver that lay at his side, placed it to his temple and sent a bullet crashing to his brain! And thus died Captain Ruben Darrow, the ranchman.

Attracted by the report of the pistol, Old Tom and Ichabod left the Sibyl alone and hastened to the scene of death. The woman followed them, and after gazing for a minute on the pallid face of the dead outlaw chief, she turned and walked slowly away weeping, her vindictiveness of spirit, to all outward appearance, having been completely subdued.

Kit Bandy's sympathy for the woman was touched by her great sorrow and her lonely situation—now rendered more dreary by the presence of death. Following her to the opposite end of the grotto, he said:

"Madam, we don't make war on women, if we can help it, and we don't want to leave you here alone with that dead man if you wish to

go away. If you wish to trust yourself in our company you shall be cared for and no questions asked. Just over here in the pass we left two charmin' young ladies who'll be kind to you, and your companions to Redwood, whither we are bound. I assure you no harm shall come to you, and you will be permitted to go your way after we reach camp."

"Then I will go away from this horrible place," she eagerly exclaimed, as if relieved in body and mind. "There are others that stop here," she went on; "but I want to get away from this horrible prison—"

"Then you're a prisoner here?" interrupted Bandy.

"A willing prisoner—I came here with a brother to serve as cook and housekeeper for the band; but he was slain a week ago, they tell me, and I want to leave here. I'll pack up my few effects and make ready to go away with you; but before we start I beg you'll kindly lay the captain's body out and cover it over until the men return."

"When will the men return, madam?" Kit questioned.

"You said no questions'd be asked if I consented to return to Redwood with you," the Sibyl responded.

"By the horn o' Joshua! so I did!" exclaimed Kit. "Pardon me—pack up your duds and be ready to skip. We'll do the best we can by the captain's body, and the Lord'll take care of his soul."

The old detective returned to his friends, and the Sibyl began her preparations for departure.

The men straightened out the limbs of the dead outlaw and covered the body with a blanket. Then they began a careful searching of the recesses and pockets of the grotto. They found various articles of value, and no little amount of gold and jewelry—all of which was no doubt obtained by robbery. So interested did they become in their search, and so fruitful was their labor, that they failed to notice the Sibyl depart quietly from the grotto. When her absence was discovered, however, it caused little concern, for Old Kit concluded she had gone out of the dismal den and would be found waiting for them on the table-rock outside. And so they went on with their treasure-hunting, nor did they cease until every hole and corner had been explored. Then a few small articles of value were placed in their pockets, and the rest secured in a canvas bag found in the grotto. They were now ready to depart and turned their faces toward the open side of the grotto. As they did so, the sound of voices and the tramp of feet fell upon their ears, and, toward the grotto from the landing at the head of the ladder, they beheld half a score of outlaws and Indians advancing, revolvers and tomahawks in hand, their faces aglow with murderous intent!

"Trapped, by the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, drawing his revolvers, and his words were followed by a wild, hysterical shriek of fiendish joy that could only have come from a woman's lips!

CHAPTER XXI.

A WICKED WOMAN'S WORK.

THE Sibyl of the robbers' cave was a woman, whose shrewdness and cunning was so deeply masked that, with his usual tact, old Kit Bandy failed to penetrate the disguise, and the minute she saw Kit and his two friends absorbed in their search for the band's concealed plunder, she deliberately walked out of the grotto to the landing on the table-rock, descended the rope-ladder and slipped away into the timber.

And no sooner did she find herself under cover of the woods, and out of the power of the detectives, than her whole being seemed to undergo a change that transformed her into a stealthy, supple tigress walking upright—gliding through the shadows, peering about her as she advanced, as if in search of prey.

On and on she went in this way until her ears were suddenly greeted by the sound of hooved feet coming her way. She peered through woods and shadows, and finally discovered a number of horsemen riding down from the north. A smile lit up her features, her eyes gleamed with a new light, and she could scarcely restrain an outburst of joy. She seemed to recognize in the cavalcade of bearded men and savages a party of friends. She finally started up and was about to step from her concealment, when her keen eye caught sight of two skulking forms issuing from the mouth of a little depression or pocket in the bluff that towered on her left. They were forms of white men—they were Bob Bayard and Little Lasso, whose attention having been at-

tracted by the sound of the horses' hoofs, had left May and Eva in concealment and crept away in hopes of ascertaining who the horsemen were.

The Sibyl crouched low, and like a tigress preparing to spring upon an unsuspecting deer, watched the two young scouts as they glided softly through the woods after the horsemen.

No sooner had they passed to her right than she rose to her feet and flitted through the shadows toward the mouth of the pocket from whence Bob and Lasso had emerged.

The entrance was almost choked up by undergrowth, but stooping low the woman glided into the bushes like a wolf—searching the thicket as she went.

At length her eyes fell upon the female forms seated under shelter of the bluff. They were May and Eva—the young women of whom Bandy had told her; and it was for them she had come down there to search. The appearance of Bob Bayard and Little Lasso from the thicket had led her to suspect the whereabouts of the girls.

With a smile upon her face, which instantly underwent another change and assumed a serene and tender expression, the woman walked straight to the girls, saying in a pleasant and assuring tone:

"My dear girls, I am glad to have found you!"

"Then you knew we were here?" responded May, rising to her feet.

"Yes, Kit Bandy told me you were down here and I have come for you by his request."

"But you are a stranger to us," replied May. "Who are you?"

The woman smiled pleasantly and replied:

"I am Wild Kathleen, the female huntress."

"And you say Kit Bandy sent you here after us?"

"Yes," the woman deliberately lied, "and you'll come without delay. There's danger about."

As the woman thus spoke she fixed her eyes upon May with a look that seemed to take complete possession of her, soul and body. The woman was an enchantress—a serpent, and the poor, timid bird fell an easy prey!

With scarcely another word the Sibyl turned and started from the thicket, followed by May and Eva. She had wrought her devilish power over them and no effort of their own will could break the spell.

Quietly and with quick footsteps the three passed from the thicket and away through the darkest part of the woods in the direction of the outlaw rendezvous.

Meanwhile Bob Bayard and Little Lasso, uneasy for the safety of Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler, had followed on after the horsemen until they saw the latter turn westward through the park. Still, not fully satisfied as to whether they were friends or foes, they continued on in hopes of obtaining this information.

Finally, when quite a mile from where they had left May and Eva, they saw the horsemen draw rein and dismount in a little opening in the woods. This enabled the scouts to obtain a fair view of the party and they at once made up their minds that the fellows were outlaws.

One of the freebooters on dismounting gave utterance to a peculiar whistle, which he repeated at intervals of about five minutes. The band appeared to be waiting an answer to the signal before venturing further and they waited until they seemed to be growing very impatient.

Suddenly, however, they were all seen to turn and gaze toward the north side of the glade. Turning their own eyes in that direction Bob Bayard and Little Lasso were surprised to see three female forms appear in the opening, and startled with speechless horror on discovering that two of the women were May and Eva.

"Great heavens! look there, Lasso!" exclaimed Bob in an excited whisper.

"They are May and Eva," added the young herdsman.

"What in the name of conscience can Kit Bandy and Rattler be doing?" the big hunter observed, impatiently. "Lasso, dare we attack that gang? I'm sure the girls are in the hands of enemies."

"Bob, there's too many there for us," replied Lasso. "We'd better wait the coming of Kit and Tom. To strike and fail would be certain death, or worse, for the women."

It was all Bayard could do to restrain the emotions within him, and he held himself in readiness to strike on the instant.

A short conversation passed between the outlaws and the Sibyl, and then, tethering their ponies to the grass, the whole band moved away, taking the women with them. They went di-

rectly westward, and Bob and Lasso kept them in sight.

At the foot of the rope-ladder leading up to the grotto they finally halted, when the Sibyl advanced, and having examined the ladder, said in a quick, excited tone:

"They are in the grotto yet! Quick, men! and avenge the death of Captain Vulture! I marked the ladder when I came down!"

With the greatest haste all of the villains but two, who were left in charge of the captives, began to mount the ladder, and close at the heels of the hindmost man followed the supple, subtle Sibyl.

With an agility that could only come of long practice the gang flew up the inclination, burning with eagerness to entrap the wary old Mountain Detective, Kit Bandy.

The foremost outlaw quickly reached the table-rock, and in less than five seconds his followers were at his side, every man with his weapons in hand.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

"ROSYCRUSIANS! wild-cats and hyenas!" exclaimed Old Tom Rattler, as the Sibyl gave utterance to that shriek that pierced the very heavens.

But if the furious woman had expected to strike terror to the hearts of the three men in the grotto by announcing her return with a body of friends by means of that demoniac exhibition of lung power, she was sadly mistaken, for Kit Bandy and pard and the invincible Old Rattler knew no fear whatever, and at once stood ready to battle with the odds advancing into the grotto.

Presuming upon her sex as a guarantee against the enemy's bullets, the frantic Sibyl went flying into the grotto, her long arms beating the air, her black hair flying about her head like the frayed banner of a pirate in a storm, her face the very picture of incarnate fury.

"Here! here you are!" she shrieked, as her eyes fell upon the three intruders; "surrender, Kit Bandy, or you'll be slain! surrender! surrender!"

The outlaws were now within the grotto and coming on the double-quick.

Stepping back into the shadows of a little alcove or pocket in the wall of the grotto, Kit and his two friends were obscured from the eyes of the gang, but the cat-eyes of Sibyl were upon them, and, pointing toward them, she cried:

"There they are—there! Shoot! shoot!"

Kit and his friends waited no longer. Their revolvers began to speak, and the foremost of the gang went down. The outlaws recoiled. The Sibyl tore her hair, stamped her foot, and shrieked forth curses upon friend and foe.

To add to the confusion of the moment, the loud reports of rifles were heard rolling up from the valley below.

The outlaws fired, and their random shots struck everywhere. Half of their force went down in a moment or two before the steady fire of the veteran trio, and the Indians in the party became panic-stricken and endeavored to dodge behind angles in the grotto wall. But Bandy and his pards now assumed the offensive, and what were left of the foe made a break for the ladder.

The Sibyl endeavored to head them off and make them fight, but in their abject terror one of them gave the virago a shove that sent her rolling down the buttress.

In a moment three Indians and two white men were on the ladder speeding down the rock, but before the foremost one was half-way down Bob Bayard and Little Lasso appeared at the foot of the buttress to receive them, while up on the rock behind Bandy and his pards appeared shouting like wild men.

The situation was a precarious one for the outlaws, and in their haste and fear they let go all hold and went tumbling down the inclination like goats over a precipice.

Not a man of the whole gang who but a few minutes before had ascended the rock so confident of victory over the hated Bandy escaped. Even the frantic Sibyl in plunging over the rock was so severely injured that she died in a few minutes.

And, while the fight had been going on in the grotto, Bob Bayard and Little Lasso had swooped down upon the villains in charge of May and Eva and effected the women's rescue without incurring the least danger.

Thus brought together again after an hour or two of rapidly changing and tragic events, with the addition of Sabina Bandy—whose real character was at once explained—to the party, a

general comparison of notes was made. When May and Eva had told their story of the Sibyl's falsehood that had led them into danger, Old Tom, with a look of disgust, said:

"Ladies, that comes o' our trustin' to the leadership o' sich a pirate as Ole Kit Bandy. That man should be safely snugged away in a retreat for antiquities—away from the influence o' woman's smiles. Do you know the old Adonis fell in love with that outlaw woman? Do you know that a smile and a sob and a tear done the work for Kit, and he agreed to carry her to Redwood in safety, and havin' thus won his little measly heart, she stole away while we were quietly plunderin' the den and brought our friends here to slaughter the valorous Mountain Detective."

"Thomas," said Old Kit reprovingly, "if you're through now you may rest your mouth. It's weary and so'm I. You're tongue's no brain-balance, Thomas. You're in your dotage and need a guardian. I'll bind you out to the first Digger Ingin I meet to take care o' you and teach you manners. I've seen haydugins o' Athabasca walruses that could give you points."

Thus the two old friends gave it to each other for a few minutes, despite the situation in which the party now found itself.

Finally, by request of May and Eva, a shallow grave was dug and the body of the Sibyl buried therein.

Returning to the grotto, Kit and Tom brought down all the valuables they had found in the place, and the preparations for resuming their journey were speedily effected.

From among the outlaws' horses, one for each of the party was selected and the rest turned over to Little Lasso who, tying them one to the other, resolved to take them into Redwood.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WAITING THE COMING OF SHELD AHL.

It was night once more in Redwood Camp, and the place was unusually quiet for one that had passed through so much excitement within the past few days. However, Ralph King and Black Vulcan were being animatedly discussed in "The Combine" and in the cabins.

Up at The Retreat, Judge Hurry, Ralph and Aimee awaited the coming of Mr. Sheldahl, as promised.

That afternoon Ralph had had his wounded arm dressed, and a very painful flesh wound it was in the muscles between the elbow and shoulder. And while they were waiting for Aimee's brother, Ralph told how he had received a bullet in his arm.

"I was on my return from Bob Bayard's," he said, "and was not over six miles from here when two men—outlaws without a doubt—sprung from the roadside, and one of them seizing my horse by the bits jerked him back on his haunches throwing me from the saddle, and as I regained my feet, the other robber covered me with a revolver and commanded my surrender."

"As I wasn't in a surrendering mood just then, I attempted to draw on the villain when his gun went off and I got it in the arm *a la* Black Vulcan. But at the same moment almost he got it in the head from a concealed rifle, and then who should come bounding from the bushes by the wayside but Mother Ike, the miner, who by the way is nobody else than Ichabod Flea, old Kit Bandy's pardner—also, Sabina Bandy, Kit's reputed wife."

"You are jesting, Ralph! Do you mean to tell me that old woman calling herself Sabina Bandy was Mother Ike?" exclaimed the astonished old man.

"I do," replied Ralph, "and when Ichabod Flea appeared in sight the other robber took to his heels. For a minute or two my arm was paralyzed and the little detective, Flea, began to tie it up, when we saw four mounted and masked men riding down the valley toward us. We both mounted my horse and broke for the hills. We were cut off from Redwood and chased into a narrow defile where we were forced to abandon my horse and seek refuge among the rocks along the foot of Horeb near the cave of Moses, the Hermit. There we were besieged for two days and nights, not daring to move. My arm gave me great pain for want of proper treatment; but finally we eluded the foe and got away. But we did not go far until I fell in a dead faint. The detective got me to a place of security and after talking the situation over, and finding I could not get home for a day or so, I sent him to Redwood to see how matters stood, for, by what Flea had told me—and he knew just what was going on even to the coming of Aimee—I knew there was something wrong. So he came disguised as a woman—as

Sabina Bandy. Through fear something might happen me I sent you my commission as a detective in the Secret Service of the Government. I was feeling so much better when he returned that I concluded to go to camp and did so. Flea went north to cooperate with Kit Bandy who is over there shadowing some suspicious characters. They think the Desert Pirates have a rendezvous somewhere in this mountain. Now this, uncle, is about the sum and substance of how I received me wound, and why I failed to return to Deadwood sooner."

"As for Rube Darrow's disappearance I know nothing, but from what the close-mouthed Ichabod Flea dropped, I am disposed to think that we are being made the victims—"

A loud rap upon the door cut short his words.

"It is brother!" exclaimed Aimee, and advancing she opened the door, to meet with disappointment and surprise. A tall man—a stranger to her—stepped unbidden into the room.

"Bless my soul! it's Kit Bandy!" burst in accents of joy from the lips of Judge Hurry.

"The Old Hermit of Horeb!" added Ralph King, starting up with a smile upon his face.

"The same, Vagabond, my boy, by the horn o' Joshua!" declared Kit Bandy, for he the caller really was; "nor am I alone. I've a hull band o' weary pilgrims out here, male and female—ugly Old Tom Rattler, big Bob Bayard, Little Lasso, the steer-whacker, and two delightful pretty gals—one o' them, I'm sorry to say, the wife o' Ralph King, the Nabob Vagabond, confound him!"

"What!" exclaimed Ralph King, manifesting no little surprise and confusion; "another woman coming here claiming to be my wife?"

"Yes, Ralph! your own wife!" came a sweet, tremulous voice from just outside the door, and then the lithe figure of May floated into the room with outstretched arms and face beaming with excitement and happiness.

Ralph King started as if suddenly confronted by an apparition; then bounding forward, he clasped his young wife in his arms.

"May, my wife, my darling!" he exclaimed, half-choked with emotion, "in God's name tell me what this surprise means?"

May, too overcome with joy to speak, sobbed in joyful silence upon her young husband's throbbing breast, while the other inmates of the house looked on in silent amazement.

In the mean time, Bob Bayard came in escorting Eva Hunter, and they were followed by Old Tom Rattler and Little Lasso, Ichabod Flea having remained outside to watch a skulker that had been observed following them ever since darkness had fallen.

For the next twenty minutes The Retreat was a scene of joy, tears and sobs, and hand-shaking and laughter, in which everybody took part.

It was some time before anything like quiet had been restored in the old ranchman's house, and when all had finally been seated explanations were called for.

The first in order was May's story of how she and her sister came to be in Arizona at that time, and it created a profound sensation. But as it was substantially as related to Bob Bayard on the night of their rescue, we will not repeat it.

May was followed by Old Rattler, who told how he had followed the Indians for days through the hills, how he finally effected their release, and, through assistance of the big hunter, got them into his cabin.

Bob came next with the story of the women's defense, their recapture, their rescue on the Colorado River, the death of White Bear and the treachery and tragic death of the Indian girl, Vine.

Little Lasso was called upon for the story of his experience with the outlaws at Broken Tree Park, and his rescue from the jaws of death by the redoubtable Old Persimmon.

Old Kit Bandy's turn came last, and taking the floor, he began:

"Friends, I'm goin' to confess right on the start that I came into this country to hunt down Black Vulcan and escape the society o' Ole Tom Rattler and the noise o' his mouth. I've had a long hard siege o' it, but succeeded in gettin' in my work on Black Vulcan, but Thomas Rattler is still abroad in the land and's got his mouth with him."

"I made up my mind some time ago—I'm not going into details, mind you—that there were some fellers in Redwood Camp that were not hurt with angelic principles, and my spicion has proved kor-rect. I established my pard, Ichabod Flea, here, to watch out for breakers, and Ich, as Mother Ike, the miner, struck a lead in the course o' time."

The fact is, I never mistrusted Ralph King for a moment o' being Vulcan, the outlaw, though I see he has his arm in a sling now. We—that's Ich and I—finally diskivered that the Desert Pirates were made up o' cowboys from various ranches over the Territory and miners from various mines, as well as a few drift-logs like Old Tom Rattler. But just how to pick out the right fellows was no easy matter, for, unlike Old Tom, they were all shrewd, sharp fellows. The hardest of all was to git onto the man who was really Black Vulcan. But to-day as we came Redwoodward we not only found one o' the outlaws' strongholds, but found therein the outlaw chief himself, virtually dyin' from the effects of a shattered arm."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the old judge, a look of satisfaction beaming upon his face.

"And there was a woman there, also," put in Old Tom, "who shed a tear and smiled and—*Kit Bandy was in her power.* Kit's an ole fool 'bout weemin. One tear and one smile overwhelmed him, and she went out and brought in nine men to kill the old tender-heart, and but for Ichabod Flea, the business part o' the Mountain Detective firm, and me, the chin-chopper o' the firm would now be buzzard hash."

"There, as Tom's mouth has subsided, I'll go on," Kit continued; "but I regret havin' to tell you, jedge, that Black Vulcan is, or was—for he's dead now—your trusted foreman, Ruben Darrow."

"Great heavens! Bandy, that can't surely be true!" the judge fairly groaned.

"It's not alers that Kit Bandy tells the truth, jedge," spoke up Old Rattler, "but *that's so*, for I war thar and saw the man, and heard him admit he was Black Vulcan, heard Kit call him Darrow, and saw the feller blow his brains out—somethin' Kit Bandy couldn't do if he'd shoot his own hull head off, for the same reason ye can't make a mullet-head fish drunk."

Kit Bandy gave Tom a withering look of scorn, a smile flitted over Bob Bayard's and Little Lasso's faces, while a look of surprise and pain settled on that of the judge.

"Well! well!" the old man finally observed with a shake of the head, "this is a terrible surprise—a sample of man's inhumanity to man! Ruben Darrow a robber-chief—Black Vulcan! dead! and by his own hand! Did he make any confession?"

"None at all," answered Kit.

"Then the secret of his conspiracy against me and Ralph King died with him!"

"Not all o' it, jedge," responded Old Kit; "my work's not all done yet, and by the time it is, I think we'll get the secret. There's been hay-dugins o' schemin' g'inst you and Ralph and these pretty ladies, and there's been lots o' actors in the plot, and there's been some good blood and some bad blood spilt, and there may be some more spilt before the thing's finished—"

A rap on the door interrupted the old detective, who answered the knock. Ben Hall, the marshal, stood just outside, his face wearing an excited look.

"Judge Hurry," he said, quickly, "is wanted at a miner's cabin at once."

The judge arose and stepped outside, demanding:

"What's wanted of me, Ben? Anything wrong?"

"I should say there was," answered Hall, in a low tone that could not be heard inside the house; "a bloody murder has been committed by somebody. Mohave Jim lies dead in his cabin. In the same room lies Gila Bill, dead, also; and Mr. Sheldahl, that lady's brother, is there dying of horrible wounds. He wants to see you, but bade me not tell his sister until after his death, which must come soon."

"Poor, wronged Aimee!" sighed the old ranchman, "it will be a hard blow to her. But wait, Ben, and I will go with you to Mohave's cabin."

The old man turned and went back into the house.

In a few minutes he, accompanied by Old Kit Bandy, came out, and, joining the marshal, the three proceeded toward Mohave's cabin.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SHELD AHL TURNS ON THE LIGHT.

WHEN Judge Hurry and his escort reached Mohave Jim's cabin they found that they had been preceded there by at least a dozen miners. The room was dimly lighted and a sickish odor pervaded the place.

At one side of the cabin, true enough, lay the dead forms of Mohave Jim and Gila Bill covered with a blanket, and on a bunk, pale and pinched, and breathing heavily, lay Sheldahl, his garments saturated with blood.

Here and there on the floor were pools of dark, coagulated blood, and revolvers and knives were scattered about. In fact, there was ample evidence of the room having been the scene of a bloody hand-to-hand struggle.

Judge Hurry and Old Kit advanced to the bedside of the dying man, who said, in a feeble voice, addressing the judge:

"Sit down, judge; I want to talk with you."

"But you are badly hurt!" exclaimed Hurry, "your wounds had better be dressed first."

"No need of that, judge," replied Sheldahl, "for I've but a few minutes to live."

"My God! you have been murdered!" cried the judge, seating himself by the dying man's side.

"There's nobody to blame for it but myself," the wounded man responded calmly; "if I had never stooped to wickedness—if I'd always been what I have endeavored to appear to you—a gentleman, I would not now be here dying the death of a victim of an evil life. I know these words are astonishing to you, and will be more so to my poor, dear sister, Aimee, whom I have sinned against as much as against you. But I want to make all reparations I can before I die."

The old ranchman made no response although completely astounded by the wounded man's frank admission. Surprise after surprise had followed each other the past few days in such rapid succession that he was prepared for 'most anything.

After a moment's pause Sheldahl cleared his throat and continued:

"My poor sister! God knows she is as innocent of wrong as the nursing babe in her lap. She really believed she was coming here to meet her husband, Van Wirt. It was I who deceived her. I coveted some of your thousands, judge, and through help of a trusted friend of yours—a man in whom you have had the greatest confidence for years—"

"You mean Ruben Darrow," Judge Hurry broke in impatiently.

"Yes, the very man."

"Well," the judge explained, "Darrow's dead, Mr. Sheldahl; he blowed out his own brains after admitting to Kit Bandy, here, that he was Black Vulcan."

"Ah! then judgment has overtaken him first," Sheldahl exclaimed with some apparent relief; "he was really the instigator of the foul plot against you and Ralph, and I a very ready and active tool. He had hopes of some day getting possession of the bulk of your fortune. He knew you had no heirs except Ralph King and did not think you cared a fig for him because of his roving and unsettled life, to say nothing of the suspicion that had begun to attach to his movements. But in this he found himself sorely mistaken, for one day when you were feeling discouraged, you told Cap you were going to take Ralph into business with you."

"Then it was that Darrow resolved to thwart the scheme. Being really the leader of a band of horse and cattle-thieves—in fact, the Desert Pirates, he at once determined on disgracing Ralph King. His followers were scattered here and there over the country. One or two were at this ranch, and a few were in mining-camps. Mohave Jim and Gila Bill were in this camp. Never were all assembled for a raid or robbery at one time. I was a member of the band, and while I never helped to rob any one, I kept the band posted as to all movements being made for its extermination. We had three strongholds or retreats: One away down on the Gulf of California, another over in Nevada, and a third in this mountain."

"When Darrow found you were determined on supplanting him with Ralph, he sent for me, and we began to plot and plan. Ralph had a wife in Lincoln, and she must first be got rid of. I was an expert penman, and having got possession of one of Ralph's letters to you, by repeated robberies of the mail between here and the railway. I wrote Mrs. King two or three letters so exactly like Ralph's handwriting that she never detected the difference. Then I ran up to Peach Springs and telegraphed her that Ralph was lying very sick—to come at once. To make sure suspicion would not be aroused, I wired her two hundred dollars. I signed my name J. Farwell, Ralph's friend."

"Well, she came on promptly. I met her, and told her Ralph was back at a mining-camp in the mountains, and started her and her sister for that camp. On the way they were attacked by Indians, as had been arranged with White Bear, the outlaw chief. They were to be taken beyond the Colorado, and held there until such time as we saw fit to release them."

"Now comes Aimee's part. She had been

deserted by her husband, Frank Van Wirt—a man whom she dearly loved. The scheme was to install her as Ralph's wife so that her child would inherit your wealth, Ruben Darrow and I secure the joint guardianship of the child, make a sale of all the property and quit Arizona with the proceeds."

"Knowing Aimee's sense of womanly honesty we dared not let her know what we were after, and she is innocent, therefore, of our crimes. I wrote her a letter which purported to come from Frank Van Wirt. In that letter he acknowledges the wrong he had done her, tells her his name is not Van Wirt, but Ralph King, that he had turned over a new leaf, and proposed to live an upright life—in short, that his uncle had given him a half-interest in all his wealth on condition he would take charge of his business. He begged her forgiveness, and asked her to come on and join him at Redwood, where they would live for the present, until Uncle Prosper's health would admit of his going to some civilized place."

"Of course, Aimee was only too glad to join her husband and we came on here. But there was a bad break in our well-laid plans. We knew you had never seen Ralph's wife and would, therefore, be none the wiser of the deception, nor would Aimee, providing she was prevented from meeting Ralph King."

"The attempt to rob you by Black Vulcan was the first backset received. The object was to place suspicion of the robbery on Ralph King, and give a mob the excuse to kill him before he returned from his long-projected visit to Bob Bayard's. He was waylaid by Mohave Jim and others on his return from the mountains and attacked by two men. But here again occurred another blunder. Mother Ike, the miner, shot one of our men dead and rescued King. The others came up and pursued them into the hills, and finally cornered them where they felt sure of their inability to escape alive."

"While the two were besieged, Mohave Jim brought Ralph's horse, and the disguise worn by Darrow on the night of the attempted robbery, to camp and presented them to you. We still felt sure of success, for you had received Aimee into your home, and she fully believed you were her husband's uncle and benefactor. Poor girl! But to our surprise and horror, in the very hour of what seemed success, Ralph walked into camp and met Aimee. Then we were defeated. It was the intention, after Ralph was put out of the way of ever being seen by Aimee, to finally relieve you of the cares of life and thus leave Aimee and her child sole heirs of the great Hurry wealth."

"To-night I met Mohave Jim and Gila Bill here, and told them of their disastrous blundering in carrying out their part of the plot, and demanded a partial restitution of the money I had advanced to carry out the scheme. They flew into a passion and we came to blows. It was the old story of rogues falling out. I shot Gila Bill dead, and Mohave Jim closed with me in a hand-to-hand fight. Here we fought for twenty minutes in silence. We fought with knives, and I finally slew my antagonist; but he stabbed me in twenty places, and I thank God I have had breath enough left to tell this story. Judge, I can hardly expect your forgiveness, but I pray you will kindly protect Aimee while here, and see that she is sent home to her people. And do not, I beseech you, tell her of this conspiracy in which she has been an innocent participant. Tell her I was slain in a quarrel with the miners. It will kill her dead to know the truth."

"I promise you," said the old ranchman, "that Aimee shall be kindly cared for as long as she remains in Redwood."

"Thank you," said Sheldahl with a sigh of relief, and having battled against death until his story was told, he began to sink rapidly, and in another hour was dead.

Thus was all mystery cleared away, and from that hour the name of Ralph King became an honored one in Redwood Basin. And when it became further known that he had been in the Secret Service of the Government for several years, ferreting out fraudulent land entries, mail-robbers and counterfeiters, his mysterious flitting about over the country was fully and satisfactorily explained to all who had been wont to look upon the handsome, dashing Nabob Vagabond as a bad man.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CONCLUSION.

It was a hard task for Judge Hurry to break to Aimee the news of her brother's death, but he did it as gently as possible, and the poor wo-

man's grief and sorrow cast a deep gloom over the hearts of all Redwood Camp that was only equalled by the excitement created over the news of Ruben Darrow's true character and tragic death, and the additional fact that Mohave Jim, Gila Bill and several others of Redwood had been local members of the band of Desert Pirates.

It was a week before the camp had fully recovered its normal condition and settled down to work.

Aimee Van Wirt became the object of everybody's sympathy when the whole story of her troubles became known.

She remained several days the guest of Judge Hurry, and when she finally departed the kind-hearted old ranchman and the miners placed in her hands a purse that would supply her wants for many years to come, and this, with the blessings of Ralph King and his happy young wife, dispelled much of the gloom that for a while seemed to blot all hopes of the future.

A party was organized, and under the leadership of Old Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler proceeded into the hills to invest the robbers' retreat, in hopes of destroying the entire gang. But when they reached the grotto they found Ruben Darrow—Black Vulcan—had been buried, as had also the others slain by the old detective's party, and the place entirely deserted.

However the party secreted themselves and watched for several days in hopes some of the gang might return; but no one came about, and the party finally returned to Redwood empty-handed and jubilant.

The camp now became the scene of general rejoicing that lasted for several days, and in which Kit Bandy and pard, and Tom Rattler were central figures and the source of more downright, whimsical fun and humor than was ever met with in a mining-camp.

The Retreat was thrown open to everybody and the judge and his new niece and her pretty sister, Eva Hunter performed the duties of host and hostess in a most royal manner.

Big Bob Bayard came in for a full share of honors for the gallant and heroic service rendered in those trying days and nights in the mountains, and for a far greater reward than he had ever dared to hope for in the love of the charming, little Eva Hunter.

And, we might as well record the fact here, that Bob Bayard never returned to the mountains. He seemed to have suddenly lost all desire for the solitary life of a hunter, and upon the earnest request of his old friend King, entered the service of "Hurry and King, Ranchmen." Nor was this all he did; in the course of a year he entered into a matrimonial alliance and Miss Eva Hunter became Mrs. Robert Bayard.

Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea, and Old Tom Rattler, ere long, left Redwood together, for new fields of adventure, bearing away with them the tokens of love and manifold blessings of those in whose behalf they had labored with such unselfish devotion and heroism.

THE END.

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